

Blood and Ashes

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A Blade in the Dark

The village had no name, or perhaps it did, but it was as worthless as the people who whispered it. A cluster of rotting hovels slouched in the filth, their rooftops sagging like the spines of broken men. Smoke curled from crooked chimneys, the thick stench of boiled cabbage, pig slop, and unwashed bodies clinging to the air. I had smelled worse.

I walked through the muck of the main road, my boots sinking into the filth with every step. Days of travel clung to me—dried blood, road dust, and sweat thick with the salt of long exertion. The sword on my back felt heavier than usual, or maybe that was just the fatigue gnawing at my bones. I had spent the last of my rations two nights ago, a stolen hunk of bread that had already gone to mold. The cold gnaw of hunger had been my only companion since.

A sign, its paint long since faded and its edges blackened with rot, swayed on rusted chains above the entrance to a lopsided building. A tavern, or something that called itself one. The door leaned open on splintered hinges, the frame gnawed through by time and termites. The light inside was dim, the flicker of candle stubs barely cutting through the smoke-heavy gloom.

I stepped inside, boots scuffing against the warped floorboards, and the smell hit me first—stale ale, old sweat, and the acrid tang of sour piss. The place was near-empty, just a handful of men slumped over their drinks, their faces half-hidden under grime and regret. A few glanced up as I entered, then quickly looked away. Good.

The barkeep was a fat, greasy man with a face like a ruined ham. He barely looked at me as I strode to the counter and slammed down a handful of tarnished coppers. He swiped them up in thick fingers, not bothering to count them before shoving a chipped tankard toward me. The ale was warm, frothy in all the wrong ways, but I drank it anyway. The bitter swill scraped down my throat, leaving the taste of rot behind. It wasn't the worst thing I'd swallowed.

I leaned against the bar, letting the fire of the alcohol chase the weariness from my limbs. My fingers drummed absently against the wood, my ears tuning in to the sounds around me—grumbling voices, the occasional scrape of a chair, the heavy snoring of a drunk slumped in the corner.

Then I heard it.

Low voices, hushed, meant not to be heard.

I turned my head just slightly, letting my eyes drift lazily to the far end of the tavern. A small group of men sat there, close together, their postures stiff. Unlike the rest of the filth-ridden wretches in this place, these ones had clean clothes—worn, but still finer than any farmer's rags. Their boots were polished, their hands soft. Not peasants.

One of them, a narrow-faced man with a scar running from his chin to his ear, stole a glance in my direction before turning back to his companions. His lips moved quickly, whispering something I couldn't hear. I had seen that look before. The look of men who thought they had a secret worth keeping.

I smiled to myself.

If they had something worth whispering about, then they had something worth taking.

I took another long pull of the bitter swill, letting my head lull forward, as if I were too tired to care about anything but the drink. In truth, I was listening. The men in the corner spoke in hushed tones, but they weren't careful enough. A lifetime spent lurking in shadows and picking out whispers from the drunken din of taverns had trained my ears well.

"...Still has it, the bastard won't part with it," one of them muttered.

"Coin means nothing to him," another grumbled. "He hoards trinkets like a dragon and won't let 'em go, not even for triple their worth."

A merchant. Someone with a prize they wanted. My fingers tightened around my tankard.

The first man leaned in, his voice barely above a breath. "The amulet's cursed, they say. But he still keeps it locked away. No one's seen it, not really. He won't even wear it. Just stares at it."

An amulet. My interest sharpened.

"Then why do you care?" a third voice scoffed. "If he won't sell, and it's cursed, what's the use?"

"Because it ain't cursed," the first man said, his voice lowering further. "It's powerful. That's why he keeps it. That's why it's worth stealing."

I barely noticed my grip tightening around my drink, the dull ache of my fingers pressing against the tankard. A powerful amulet in the hands of some reclusive hoarder? If it was worth stealing, then it was worth taking for myself.

I turned, leaning an elbow against the counter, and let my gaze settle on the men in the corner. One of them noticed—scar-faced, ratty eyes, the kind of man who thought he was smarter than he was. He didn't like the way I was looking at them. I saw the annoyance flicker in his expression, the shift of his posture. He would make a mistake soon.

I decided to help him along.

"You lot sound like women squawking over jewelry," I said, my voice carrying across the dead air of the tavern. The barkeep, who had been polishing a filthy cup with an even filthier rag, paused. A few of the drunks stirred from their stupor, sensing trouble.

Scar-face's lip curled. "The hell did you just say?"

I drained the last of my ale and set the tankard down slow, deliberate. “I said you sound like a clutch of hens. Or maybe you want to be the kind that wears amulets instead of steals them?”

One of his friends barked a short laugh, but Scar-face didn’t find it funny. His chair scraped as he stood, his fists balling at his sides.

I smiled.

I didn’t stand yet. I wanted him to get closer. Let him think he had the advantage.

“You’ve got a big mouth for a dog covered in road filth,” he sneered. “Maybe I ought to shut it for you.”

I waited until he was nearly on top of me before I moved.

Faster than he could react, I grabbed the tankard and slammed it into the side of his head. The crack of metal on bone sent a shudder through the air. Scar-face reeled, stumbling, but I was already on my feet. My hand went to my belt, and in a blink, my dagger was out.

He barely had time to gasp before I plunged it into his gut.

The tavern exploded into chaos. Chairs scraped, men shouted, but none of them moved to stop me. Scar-face made a wet choking sound as I twisted the blade and pissed himself.

He collapsed to the floor, clutching his stomach, blood pooling between his fingers. His wide, disbelieving eyes locked onto mine. I watched the light go out of them with the same indifference I’d show a dying rat.

The room had gone silent. The only sound was the dripping of blood onto the wooden floor.

I wiped my blade on his tunic and sheathed it, turning my gaze to the rest of them. His friends had gone pale. They looked at me, then at the corpse, then at each other. None of them wanted to be next.

“Now,” I said, rolling my shoulders as if I had merely stretched. “About that merchant.”

The silence held for only a breath before the first scream rang out. A woman in the back of the tavern clutched her mouth, eyes wide with horror. The barkeep staggered backward, knocking over a jug of ale, his face pale as death. The other drinkers shoved their chairs away, scrambling for the door like rats fleeing a sinking ship.

Then came the sound I expected—the heavy clang of boots, the rattle of steel.

The town guard.

They burst through the door, four of them, armed with rust-pitted swords and mismatched armor. Probably farmers playing soldier when they weren’t tilling fields. I could see it in their eyes—the hesitation, the uncertainty. They had faced drunks, petty thieves, maybe a bandit or two. But not me.

One of them, a burly man with a drooping mustache, pointed his blade at me. “You just killed a man in cold blood, you bastard!”

I nudged the corpse with my boot, watching the blood spread across the floor. “He had it coming.”

“You’ll be coming with us,” another guard growled, stepping forward. “Drop the blade.”

I sighed. They really thought this would end in an arrest.

I moved before they could react. My sword came free in a single, fluid motion, a blur of steel in the dim candlelight. I lunged, my blade punching through the ribs of the closest guard, sliding between bone and flesh like a butcher’s knife through pork.

He gasped, a wet, pathetic sound, his mouth frothing red as he crumpled.

The others rushed me.

A blade flashed toward my face. I ducked, feeling the wind of its swing scrape past my cheek. I drove my knee into the attacker’s gut, doubling him over, then brought my pommel crashing down on the back of his skull. He collapsed, twitching, but I was already turning.

The mustached fool tried to raise his sword, but he was too slow. I stepped inside his reach and hacked across his throat. The steel bit deep, nearly severing his head from his shoulders. He gurgled, hands clawing at his ruined neck, then toppled like a felled tree.

The last guard turned to run.

I was on him in two strides.

I grabbed a fistful of his hair and yanked his head back, exposing his throat. He let out a strangled whimper, but I didn’t let him beg. My sword flashed once, and his head came free in a wet, grisly spray.

The severed head tumbled from my grip, bouncing twice on the cobblestone street before rolling to a stop. The dead man’s body stood for half a breath longer, shuddering like a puppet with its strings cut, then collapsed in a heap.

I walked over to the head, nudging it with my boot, watching the lifeless eyes stare into nothing. The alley was still, the only sound the slow drip of blood pooling into the cracks of the stone.

A grin curled my lips. I drew back my foot and sent the head flying into the gutter with a sickening thud.

The street was empty. No more guards, no more witnesses.

I sheathed my sword and melted into the alleys, disappearing before the town could muster the courage to send more men to die.

The merchant's house was on the wealthier side of this wretched village—not that it meant much. It was a two-story home of half-rotted wood, with shuttered windows and a door that had likely never seen a proper lock. I circled it once, keeping to the shadows, listening. No dogs. No guards. Just a faint flicker of candlelight in the upstairs room.

He was alone.

I slipped my dagger free and slid the blade between the door and its frame, prying just enough to snap the weak latch. The door swung open with a soft creak, and I stepped inside, my boots soundless on the wooden floor. The stench of stale incense and old parchment filled the air, mingling with the faint odor of spoiled food. Shelves lined the walls, stacked with trinkets and baubles, worthless relics to anyone who knew better.

A faint shuffle came from upstairs.

I climbed the staircase slowly, taking my time. The last thing I wanted was for him to hear me before I was next to him. The candlelight wavered beneath a doorway at the end of the hall. I stepped up to it and nudged it open with my foot.

The merchant sat hunched at a desk, his back to me, scribbling something on a parchment. A frail old man with a wispy gray beard and a hunched spine. He hadn't even heard me enter.

Pathetic.

I closed the door behind me. The soft click made him freeze. He turned, fear flashing in his milky eyes as he saw me.

“W-Who—?” he stammered, but I was already moving.

I grabbed a fistful of his beard and yanked him from his chair, throwing him onto the floor. He let out a wheezing cry, limbs flailing like a dying insect. I placed a boot on his chest, pinning him down as he gasped for breath.

“I hear you had an amulet,” I said, pressing down harder. “Where is it?”

His lips trembled, but no words came. Just a pathetic choking sound.

I drew my dagger and placed the tip beneath his left eye, just enough to pierce the skin. “Talk, old man. Or I start cutting.”

He whimpered. “P-Please, I—”

I pressed the blade in deeper. A thin rivulet of blood trickled down his cheek. His breath hitched, his whole body trembling.

“I sold it!” he blurted. “It’s gone! I swear it!”

I tilted my head, watching him squirm. “To who?”

“A sorcerer,” he gasped. “He—he came through weeks ago. Paid in gold, more than I could refuse. Took the amulet and vanished into the swamps.”

A sorcerer.

I let that sink in. If a magic-wielding fool had it, then it wasn’t just valuable—it was dangerous.

I leaned down, dragging the dagger lightly across the skin beneath his eye. “What does it do?”

He swallowed, his throat bobbing like a panicked bird. “I don’t—I don’t know.”

I smiled. “Wrong answer.”

The dagger slipped downward, carving a neat line across his cheek. His scream was shrill, echoing through the room.

“P-Please! I swear on my life—I never knew! Only that he wanted it badly!” He sobbed, hands clawing at the floor. “Said it was ancient, something lost to time—”

I leaned back, wiping my dagger clean on his robe. I could tell he was telling the truth. The sniveling wretch was too weak to lie under pain.

The old man gasped, his frail body convulsing in fear. “Please,” he whimpered. “I’ve told you everything. Just let me go.”

I stared down at him, considering.

Then I grabbed the nearest candle and tipped it over, letting the wax and flame spill across the parchment-strewn floor.

The fire caught instantly.

I stepped over the old man and walked out, his shrieks of terror chasing me as the flames consumed his home.

The swamp was calling.

The fire spread fast. The parchment, the curtains, the dry wooden shelves—all of it fed the flames, turning the room into a furnace within seconds. The merchant’s screams sharpened into raw, animal howls as he scrambled away from the growing inferno. His frail limbs clawed at the floor, trying to drag himself to safety.

I watched him for a moment, his eyes wide and pleading, reflecting the flickering orange glow. He tried to speak, to beg again, but the smoke choked the words from his throat.

I turned and walked away.

By the time I reached the bottom of the stairs, the fire had swallowed the walls behind me. The heat licked at my back as I stepped outside, vanishing into the cool night air.

The streets were empty. The people of this village were cowards, huddled in their hovels, pretending they hadn't heard the screams. Only the glow of the fire would draw them out—but by then, it would be too late.

The flames reached the entire structure, and the windows shattered in bursts of embers and smoke. A heavy wooden beam collapsed inside, sending sparks shooting into the dark sky. The whole house groaned like a dying beast.

A single figure stumbled into the street, half-dressed, eyes wide with terror. A witness.

I locked eyes with him. He opened his mouth, whether to scream or to pray, I couldn't tell.

I stepped toward him.

He turned and fled.

Smart.

Behind me, the burning house roared, spitting embers into the sky. The crackling of wood and the collapse of beams filled the night with noise, but no one dared step forward to stop it. They would only come when the danger had passed, when the ashes were all that remained.

By then, I would be long gone.

I tightened the straps on my pack and strode toward the village's edge. The road stretched ahead, cutting into the dark wilderness beyond. Somewhere past the trees, beyond the bogs and the misted waters, a sorcerer held the amulet that should have been mine.

I would take it from him.

And if he resisted, I would watch him burn just like the merchant.

The swamp awaited.

The Bog

The swamp stank of rot and decay, a festering wound carved into the earth. The air was thick with the stink of stagnant water, mold, and something worse—something old, something dead, yet still lurking beneath the surface. I had been trudging through this filth for hours, my boots sinking with each step, the mud sucking at my heels like grasping hands.

Thorny roots jutted out from the mire, clawing at my legs. The twisted trees loomed above, their branches tangled like the fingers of drowning men, blocking out the weak, gray sky. Mosquitoes swarmed my face, the buzzing a constant irritation.

Then I heard it. The low, guttural growl.

I stopped, my hand instinctively tightening around the hilt of my sword. The sound came from ahead, just beyond a tangle of reeds. A second growl followed, then a third.

Wolves. No—larger than wolves.

A pair of glowing yellow eyes peered through the mist, followed by another, and another. Then they emerged—dire wolves, their hulking forms moving like shadows between the trees. Their fur was matted with filth, their eyes burning with the hunger of beasts that had long forgotten easy prey.

One of them stepped forward, lips curled in a snarl, its massive body tense with barely restrained violence. I counted five in total. Too many to outrun.

Good.

I drew my sword in a slow, deliberate motion, letting the steel glint dully in the swamp's dim light. The wolves hesitated, sensing that this meal would not die quietly.

Then the largest one lunged.

I sidestepped, bringing my blade across its throat in a single, brutal arc. Blood sprayed, black in the half-light. The beast collapsed, thrashing, but I was already moving.

Another snapped at my leg—I drove my boot into its skull, feeling bone crack beneath my heel. It yelped and staggered back. A third leapt for my throat. I raised my arm, letting it clamp down on my bracer, the force nearly wrenching my shoulder from its socket. With a roar, I wrenched free and drove my sword through its ribs, twisting the blade until the wolf went limp.

The last two hesitated now. They saw the corpses of their kin. They saw the blood dripping from my steel.

One turned and fled. The other wasn't as wise.

It lunged, snapping wildly. I met it head-on, grabbing its throat with my free hand and ramming my blade through its chest. It let out a strangled whimper before going still.

I shoved the corpse aside, stepping back to admire my work. Four dead beasts, their bodies already attracting the first hungry flies. Their carcasses would feed the scavengers tonight.

I wiped the blood from my sword, the weight of the swamp pressing down on me once more. The air was still. No more growls, no more movement.

I rolled my shoulders and kept walking.

The amulet was still ahead. And so was its owner.

The swamp stretched endlessly, a labyrinth of gnarled roots and pools of black water that stank of something long dead. The farther I walked, the quieter it became—no croaking toads, no insects buzzing, just the occasional drip of something unseen slipping into the mire. The air felt heavy, thick with unseen malice.

Then I saw it.

Perched above the sludge on rotting stilts, a crooked hut loomed in the mist, its warped wooden planks sagging under their own weight. It looked abandoned, but I knew better. A trail of bones—animal, mostly, though some were suspiciously human—lined the rickety steps leading to the door. A single candle flickered in the window, its feeble glow barely piercing the gloom.

I approached without hesitation, boots sloshing through the shallow muck beneath the hut. The wood groaned under my weight as I climbed the stairs, the railing disintegrating at my touch. My hand went to my sword as I reached the top.

Before I could knock, the door creaked open.

A woman stood in the threshold, though to call her a woman was generous. Her spine was bent like a gnarled tree, her skin loose and mottled with age. Strands of greasy white hair clung to her face, and her eyes—too wide, too knowing—gleamed yellow in the dim light. The scent of old herbs and something fouler clung to her like a second skin.

"Ahhh," she crooned, her voice like dried leaves rustling. "A traveler. No... not just any traveler. A seeker."

I didn't move. Didn't speak. I had met witches before. They all played the same game—mystery, riddles, honeyed words laced with venom.

Her lip curled in amusement as she stepped aside, gesturing for me to enter. "You've come far. And for something precious, yes?"

I stepped into the hut, the warped floor bending slightly beneath my boots. Herbs dangled from the rafters, their dried husks swaying in the faint, sour breeze. Shelves lined the walls, filled with vials of dark liquid, cracked skulls, and trinkets that reeked of bad magic. In the center of the room, a large iron cauldron sat atop a dying fire, a thick greenish broth bubbling within.

The witch circled me, slow, deliberate, her bony fingers twitching as if itching to reach out. "You seek the sorcerer," she whispered. "You seek the amulet."

My hand rested on the hilt of my sword. "Tell me where he is."

She grinned, revealing a row of jagged, yellow teeth. "I could. But knowledge does not come freely. I require... a favor."

Of course she did. They always did.

I exhaled sharply, watching her as she drifted to the cauldron, stirring the thick liquid with a wooden ladle. "Speak," I said, my patience thin.

Her grin widened. "A heart, warrior. Fresh and still warm. Bring it to me, and I shall tell you where your sorcerer hides."

I studied her, considering. The request wasn't surprising. Blood magic always required something—flesh, pain, suffering. It didn't matter who the heart belonged to.

She watched me, those yellow eyes gleaming with anticipation.

I smiled.

"Fine," I said, turning for the door. "Whose heart do you want?"

The witch's grin stretched wider, a grotesque thing, full of rotten teeth and malice. She shuffled toward a rickety shelf, fingers curling around a small, bone-handled dagger. The blade was blackened, stained with years of work in the dark arts. She turned it in her hand, studying the dull gleam, then extended it toward me.

"A hunter," she crooned. "A man who walks these swamps like he owns them. He has wronged me, stolen from me. A trespasser, a thief, a wretched little thing who does not respect power."

I didn't take the blade. My own steel was sharper. "Where?"

She chuckled, as if delighted by my lack of hesitation. Her skeletal fingers twitched, and she hobbled to the window, peering out into the mist. "His camp lies to the north, near the old drowned ruins. He hunts alone. No family, no kin to mourn him." She turned back to me, her yellow eyes burning with something wicked. "Take his heart, bring it to me while it still steams, and I shall give you what you seek."

I met her gaze. "What did he steal?"

Her face darkened. "A piece of what is mine. Something he cannot understand. He thinks it is a trinket, something to wear on a leather cord." Her lips twisted. "He does not know it is killing him."

A foolish man. Not my concern.

I glanced at the blade she still held out to me. A ceremonial thing. A tool for rituals and gutting sacrifices, not real work.

I drew my own dagger, flipping it once in my palm. "Keep it," I said, turning for the door.

The witch cackled softly as I stepped out into the night.

"Good hunting, warrior."

I didn't answer. I was already thinking about how best to kill the man.

The hunter never saw me coming.

His camp was a miserable thing—just a threadbare tent pitched beneath the twisted boughs of a dead tree, a dying fire barely holding back the swamp's creeping chill. His kill from the day before, a gutted stag, hung from a crude wooden frame, its ribs exposed to the damp night air. He was tending to it, running a whetstone along his skinning knife, his mind dulled by routine.

I stepped from the shadows without a sound. My dagger flashed in the dim light, and before he could rise, my arm was around his throat, dragging him backward.

He thrashed, but I was stronger. I slammed him to the ground, forcing his face into the mud. He gasped, choking on filth, his fingers clawing at my arm.

"You should have stayed out of the witch's affairs," I murmured, pressing my knee into his back.

He tried to shout, but I drove my dagger into his side, twisting it between his ribs. A wet, gurgling sound escaped him. His body convulsed, legs kicking feebly. I twisted harder, feeling the last resistance leave his muscles as his breath rattled out.

But I wasn't done.

I rolled him onto his back, his eyes already glazing over, his lips twitching with some half-formed plea. I grabbed my blade and placed it against his chest. With practiced ease, I carved a deep incision, slicing through flesh, through muscle, through the thin, trembling barrier that protected the thing I needed.

Blood gushed over my hands, pooling in the recesses of his ribs. His body gave a final shudder, the last useless flicker of life before death fully took him. I pried the ribs apart with both hands, the wet snap of bone splitting beneath my grip. Steam rose from the cavity, the warmth of his dying body meeting the swamp's cold air.

And then I reached in.

His heart was still warm, slick in my grasp. I wrenched it free with a wet tear, the last of his blood spilling across the muck.

The bog witch would be pleased.

I wrapped the organ in a piece of cloth and stood, stepping over his twitching corpse. The fire flickered beside me, indifferent to the violence that had just soaked the earth in crimson.

I left his body for the swamp. The hag had made no request for a burial.

The witch was waiting when I returned, her hunched frame silhouetted against the flickering light of her cauldron. She grinned as I tossed the bloodied cloth onto her wooden table, the heart landing with a wet thud.

Her clawed fingers unfurled the cloth, and her yellowed eyes gleamed with satisfaction. She picked up the organ, cradling it like a precious gem, and inhaled deeply, savoring the lingering warmth.

"Ahhh," she crooned, her voice dripping with delight. "So fresh... so full of regret." She cackled, her shoulders shaking with laughter. "You do fine work, warrior."

I crossed my arms, unimpressed. "The sorcerer."

She licked her lips and set the heart into a bubbling pot, where it sank beneath the thick green liquid with a hiss. "Yes, yes. As promised." She turned to me, her grin never faltering. "He dwells in a valley, through the forest. A tower, hidden by mist and shadow. There, he clutches your amulet like a babe at its mother's breast."

Her grin widened. "But beware, warrior. He will not part with it willingly."

I smirked. "Neither do the dead."

I turned on my heel and left her to her vile cauldron.

The sorcerer's tower awaited.

I had what I came for. The sorcerer's tower lay ahead, hidden in the blackened depths of this wretched swamp, and nothing in this place would stop me from reaching it.

I stepped out onto the rickety porch, the wood groaning beneath my weight, the cold, damp air curling around me like a thing alive. Behind me, the witch cackled softly to herself, the sound slithering through the gloom like the whisper of dead leaves.

Then I felt it.

A slow, creeping pressure, curling around my skin like unseen fingers, slithering through my veins like cold worms burrowing into flesh. My muscles tensed. My breath came thick, heavy. The weight of something unnatural clawed at the edges of my vision.

A curse.

I turned, and the hag stood in the doorway, her yellowed teeth bared in a grin too wide for her wrinkled face. Her gnarled fingers twisted in the air, whispering words of power, her voice thick with the rot of forgotten tongues.

I knew the feeling. The sluggish pull of dark magic, leeching strength, planting sickness, a hex meant to drag me into the mire before I could claim what was mine.

I didn't hesitate.

With a single stride, I closed the space between us. My blade flashed in the dim light, and before she could finish the last syllable of her incantation, I drove the steel deep into her gut.

She let out a wet, gasping sound, eyes wide with disbelief.

I twisted the blade.

Her frail body shuddered, bony fingers clawing at my chest, feeble, useless. I shoved her backward, tearing the sword free as she crumpled onto the rotting floor. Her blood seeped into the wood, dark as oil, her limbs twitching as the last of her breath rattled through her ruined throat.

She tried to speak, but no words came. Only a wet, gurgling rasp.

I wiped my blade clean on her tattered robe and looked around. Shelves of dried bones, black candles dripping wax like congealed fat, jars of things better left unspeakable. The stink of old magic filled the air, thick, cloying, pressing against my skin like damp cloth.

This place would not stand.

I reached for the nearest candle and knocked it onto the brittle, parchment-strewn floor. The flames caught instantly, licking up the wood, crawling toward the dry herbs hanging from the rafters.

The fire spread fast, devouring the shelves, the walls, the rotten support beams. The hut moaned as the flames consumed it from the inside out. Smoke billowed into the night, thick and acrid, twisting into the fog like black veins spreading through a corpse.

I stepped back, watching as the flames reached the rafters, the thatched roof collapsing in on itself, sending a cascade of embers into the swamp.

The hag's body lay still within the inferno, the magic in her bones turning to ash. Whatever curses she had conjured, whatever poison she had whispered into the wind, it burned with her now.

The swamp would claim the ruins, as it had claimed so many before.

I turned without another glance and walked into the mist.

The sorcerer was waiting.

Blood in the Forest

The swamp's stench faded behind me, swallowed by the towering trees of the forest. The air here was sharper, cleaner, though it carried the bite of old pine and damp earth. The sky was a dull gray, smothered by a thick canopy that turned the world beneath into shifting shadows and muted light.

I moved in silence, the crunch of fallen needles and dead leaves barely a whisper beneath my boots. The forest was alive with unseen things—eyes peering from the hollows of trees,

wings beating against the heavy air. Somewhere in the distance, a wolf howled, low and mournful.

Then I saw them.

A dozen figures moved between the trees, their footfalls lighter than breath, their forms blending with the mist and shifting branches. Elves.

They moved with the precision of hunters, their bows drawn, their sharp ears twitching at the slightest disturbance. They had not yet seen me, but that would not last.

I stepped forward, making no attempt to hide my approach.

One of them turned sharply, his emerald-green cloak twisting with the motion. His eyes found mine instantly, golden and wary. He was tall, like all his kind, his frame lean but coiled with the promise of violence. A scar traced his cheekbone, old but deep, a reminder that even elves bleed.

The others turned as well, arrows nocked, hands resting on hilts. They did not yet draw, but the warning was clear.

"You should not be here," the scarred elf said, his voice as smooth as river stone but edged with steel.

I studied him, then the others. They carried no sigils of a kingdom, no marks of allegiance. Rangers, most likely—guardians of their woods, protectors of beasts and old trees that had stood before the first men walked the earth.

I smirked. "Neither should you, if you expect me to care."

One of the younger elves scowled. "Turn back," he snapped, shifting his grip on his bow. "This forest is no place for your kind."

I glanced past them, further into the trees. They weren't here for me. They were tracking something. The way they stood, the way their eyes flicked toward the undergrowth—they were watching, waiting.

"What are you hunting?" I asked, ignoring the elf's demand.

Scar-face narrowed his eyes. "Something beyond you, human. You will not interfere."

I laughed, low and dark. "Tell me what it is, and I'll consider it."

The younger elf's expression darkened, his fingers flexing against the bowstring. "You are nothing but a trespasser," he spat. "Turn back or be turned back."

I rolled my shoulders, feeling the weight of my sword settle against my back. The elf thought he could threaten me. He was wrong.

Scar-face exhaled, as if dealing with a particularly stubborn animal. "You are unwise to be so bold, traveler. You do not understand what walks these woods tonight."

I tilted my head. "Then tell me."

His jaw tightened. For a moment, I thought he would. But instead, he nodded to his kin, and one by one, the elves began to move past me, slipping through the trees like ghosts.

"You have been warned," he said, his gaze lingering on mine.

Then they vanished into the mist.

I exhaled, rolling my neck until I felt the satisfying crack of bone. They thought their warning mattered.

I grinned.

They didn't know me at all.

And if whatever they hunted was worth killing...

Then I was going to kill it first.

I let them believe I was leaving. I turned away, let the trees swallow me, let the distance stretch between us until they no longer bothered to glance over their shoulders. I moved like a shadow, my steps measured, my breath slow.

Then I followed.

They were skilled trackers, but they weren't watching for something tracking them. Their focus was on whatever beast they hunted, their eyes scanning the undergrowth, their ears attuned to distant sounds of the wild. I stayed beyond their sight, weaving through the trees, always at the edge of the mist.

By nightfall, they made camp.

A small clearing, chosen carefully—hidden beneath the thick canopy, the fire kept low, barely a flicker between the logs. They spoke little. The older ones murmured about tracks, scents, movements in the trees. The younger ones sharpened blades, checked bowstrings, exchanged hushed words of confidence. They were comfortable.

They shouldn't have been.

I waited.

One by one, the elves settled into their watches, rotating shifts, their unnatural eyes cutting through the dark. But even elves grow tired. Even elves falter. And eventually, one slept too deeply.

He was young. Not the scar-faced leader, not one of the seasoned ones—just a boy in their eyes, still eager, still naïve enough to think that the quiet of the forest meant safety. He lay wrapped in a thick green cloak, his quiver still strapped to his side, his bow resting within arm's reach.

Not close enough.

I moved like death itself, silent as a whisper in the wind. My dagger slid free of its sheath, the steel cold in my grip. I knelt beside him, watching the rise and fall of his breath, the faint flicker of his eyelids as he drifted through whatever dream these creatures had.

Then I slit his throat.

The sound was soft, barely a wet gurgle as he jerked awake, his fingers twitching uselessly, clutching at the river of blood spilling down his chest. His golden eyes flickered wide with confusion, then terror, then nothing at all.

I caught his body before it could thrash, easing it down, muffling the final twitches of his dying limbs. His lifeblood pooled into the dirt, soaking into the earth, dark and steaming.

The others did not wake.

I moved quickly, stripping him of his supplies—his bow, his quiver, the small satchel of dried meats and hard bread tied to his belt. A waterskin, a skinning knife, a bundle of herbs wrapped tightly in cloth. Good enough.

I slung his quiver over my shoulder, adjusted the bow, and stepped back into the trees, vanishing into the black of the forest.

By dawn, they would find his corpse.

By then, I would be long gone.

They came at dawn.

I had put miles between us by then, slipping through the undergrowth like a wraith, but elves were not like men. They moved faster, lighter, their steps leaving barely a whisper on the forest floor. They knew these woods better than I ever would.

I first sensed them in the silence. The birds had stopped singing. The rustling of small creatures had vanished. Even the wind held its breath.

They were close.

Then an arrow hissed past my ear.

I dropped low, rolling behind the trunk of a thick oak as a second arrow thudded into the bark where my head had been a moment before.

"Human filth," a voice snarled from the trees. "You think you can murder one of ours and walk away?"

I grinned. They had found their rage. Good.

I drew my sword, rolling my shoulders as I stepped from behind the tree, scanning the mist-laden undergrowth. Shadows shifted between the branches, barely visible, their forms moving too fast to track. A third arrow streaked toward me, and this time I caught the movement, twisting at the last second. The shaft grazed my shoulder, cutting through leather, drawing a thin line of blood.

I laughed. "You should've stayed by your fire," I called, my voice thick with mockery. "You should've let your little friend rot in the dirt."

A furious cry echoed through the trees, and then they were upon me.

One came from the left, a curved blade flashing in the morning light. I parried, metal clashing, and drove my boot into his stomach, sending him staggering back. Another dropped from the branches above, aiming to run me through from behind. I twisted, catching his blade with my own, locking us together in a struggle of strength.

He was fast, but I was stronger.

I wrenched my sword free and slammed my pommel into his jaw, shattering bone. He reeled, spitting blood, and I wasted no time. My blade found his throat, cutting deep, the warmth of his life spilling across my hands.

A second elf came at me from behind, a dagger seeking my ribs. I twisted, grabbing his wrist, snapping it backward until I heard the wet crack of bone. His scream barely left his lips before I buried my sword in his gut, twisting viciously as he choked on his own blood.

More were coming.

Scar-face emerged from the trees, his golden eyes burning with hatred, his bow discarded, his twin swords drawn. He moved fast, faster than the others, his blades a blur as he struck at me. I blocked, sidestepped, our steel ringing through the clearing in a deadly dance. He was skilled, but rage made him reckless.

I waited for my opening.

He overextended—a small misstep, the slightest shift in his weight. But it was enough.

I slammed my shoulder into him, knocking him off balance, then raked my blade across his thigh. He stumbled, and I capitalized, bringing my sword down in a brutal arc.

He barely blocked in time, his arms shaking under the force of the blow. His footing faltered, and I kicked him hard in the chest, sending him sprawling into the dirt.

I stood over him, sword poised for the kill.

His eyes met mine, still burning, still defiant. "You are a rabid beast," he spat, blood dripping from his lips. "And beasts always die in the end."

I smirked. "Maybe. But not today."

I drove my sword through his chest.

Some of the elves fled, their cowardice finally overtaking their vengeance. I let them run. Let them carry their grief back to whatever hollow gods they prayed to.

The others I wouldn't let to flee.

The elf closest to me had barely turned before I drove my blade through his back, the steel bursting from his chest in a spray of crimson. He gasped—a short, pitiful sound—before I tore the sword free and kicked his body to the ground.

Another one lunged at me, twin daggers flashing, his movements fluid as running water. He was fast. Too fast. His blade sank into my side, slicing deep, fire blooming in my ribs.

I roared, seizing his wrist before he could twist the dagger and jammed my own sword up through his gut. I pushed until the tip burst from the back of his skull, his golden eyes rolling white as he spasmed against the steel. I let him drop, his lifeless body twitching at my feet.

Pain pulsed hot in my side, but I had no time to dwell on it. The next one was already on me, an arrow nocked and loosed in the same breath.

I moved, but not fast enough.

The shaft punched through my shoulder, biting deep into muscle. I staggered, snarling through clenched teeth as my left arm went numb. The elf had another arrow ready, his hands steady despite the carnage around him.

Too steady.

I charged.

He loosed the arrow, and I twisted at the last second—his aim was true, but the angle was off. The tip sliced across my ribs instead of burying deep.

He had no time to fire again.

I closed the distance, grabbing his bow and snapping it in half before driving my sword through his stomach, twisting the blade until his scream died in a wet gurgle.

The last elf—the scar-faced leader—was already bleeding out at my feet, his chest heaving with ragged, shuddering gasps. The shit was still alive. He tried to speak, but blood bubbled from his lips.

I crouched beside him, gripping the arrow buried in my shoulder. Our eyes locked as I ripped it free with a sharp yank, the pain blinding, lightning through my bones. I gritted my teeth against the wave of dizziness, holding his gaze as I spat blood onto the dirt beside him.

“You should have walked away,” I murmured.

Then I slashed my dagger across his throat.

The forest was silent now. No more arrows, no more curses shouted in elvish, no more rustling of bodies moving in the undergrowth. Just the crackling of the wind through the trees and the stink of spilled blood soaking into the roots.

I pressed a hand to my side. The wound was deep, leaking warmth down my hip. My shoulder throbbed where the arrow had pierced me, my fingers already sticky with my own blood.

I wouldn’t last long like this.

I found a fallen tree, blackened from some long-forgotten lightning strike, and tore off a thick branch. The wood was dry, brittle—perfect.

With one knee on the forest floor, I unsheathed my dagger and held the blade over the flickering campfire the elves had left behind. The steel blackened, heating until it glowed a dull, angry red.

I exhaled.

Then I pressed it to my wound.

The pain was instant, searing, an unbearable heat that sent a violent tremor through my limbs. The smell of my own burning flesh filled my nose, acrid and sickening, but I didn’t stop. I held the blade there, teeth bared, muscles locked, until the wound was no longer weeping red.

I pulled the blade away, panting, sweat slicking my skin despite the cold.

One wound sealed. One more to go.

I repeated the process with my side, the agony nearly bringing me to my knees. When it was done, I slumped back against a tree, my breath ragged, my vision swimming at the edges.

The elves were dead. Their hunt was over.

Mine wasn’t.

I pushed myself to my feet and kept walking.

Night fell heavy and cold. The scent of charred flesh clung to me—my own. My wounds throbbed with every step, the burned flesh stiff, but they would hold. Pain was nothing new. Pain was proof I was still alive.

The trees loomed taller now, their blackened branches twisting against the sky, whispering with the wind that cut through the forest like a dying breath. The last of the elves lay far behind me, their blood feeding the roots of the earth. I had taken their food, their water, and their warmth, but not their rest. Sleep would have been a mistake.

I found a hollow beneath the twisted roots of a fallen tree, half-sunk into the damp earth. It would do. The ground was wet, but I gathered enough stones to form a fire pit, striking steel against flint until the dry kindling caught. Flames flickered to life, feeble at first, then steady, pushing back the gloom.

I sat, pulling at the straps of my armor, hissing as the leather peeled away from the wounds beneath. The cut in my side was deep, but not fatal. The bastard's blade had missed anything important—just muscle, torn and bleeding. I dug into my pack, pulling free a handful of moss, pressing it into the wound. The sting was sharp, but the damp green clumps would slow the bleeding. I wrapped a strip of cloth around my ribs, pulling it tight until the pain blurred into something distant, something I could ignore.

The smell of salted meat filled the air as I skewered a strip of dried venison over the flames, watching the fat sizzle, darkening at the edges. I ate slowly, tearing at the tough flesh, washing it down with a pull from my flask. The spirit was sharp, biting, but it warmed my throat, numbing the dull ache in my ribs.

Smoke curled from the end of my clay pipe as I leaned back against the roots, letting the bitter taste settle on my tongue. The night was silent, save for the occasional drip of water from the twisted branches overhead. The trees in this part of the swamp were dead—blackened husks, their skeletal limbs reaching toward the sky like charred fingers. No birds. No insects. Just stillness.

I exhaled, watching the smoke coil in the firelight. Another fight, another wound. Nothing new. My body had been torn and stitched a hundred times over, and it would be again. I flexed my fingers, feeling the tightness in my arm where the arrow had struck. The wound was healing, but it would slow me.

Didn't matter.

I took another pull from the flask, letting the warmth settle in my gut, and watched the fire burn.

Something was following me.

I had felt it for an hour now, its presence clinging to the air like frost, unseen but heavy. A wrongness. The kind that made the skin crawl and the bones shiver. The kind that did not belong in the world of the living.

I knew what it was.

A wraith.

It did not move like a beast, nor like a man. No snapping of twigs, no rustling of leaves—only a presence, a whisper in the cold, a flicker of something in the edges of my vision. Every time I turned, there was nothing. But it was there.

Watching.

Hunting.

The cold deepened. My breath came in pale tendrils of mist, and the warmth in my chest felt like it was being leached away, drawn into the darkness that slithered just beyond the reach of my sight.

Then I saw it.

A shape, barely a shape at all—just a ripple in the air, a distortion of shadow and moonlight, shifting in the mist. It had no eyes, no face, only a shroud of black emptiness, moving without sound, without breath.

It wanted me dead.

I had no silver, no enchanted steel. My sword would carve through it like wind through smoke. I could fight beasts, I could fight men, but I would not waste my strength against a thing that did not bleed.

I needed shelter.

Through the trees, barely visible in the gloom, I spotted it—stone jutting from the earth, ancient and crumbling, half-swallowed by the forest. A ruin.

I moved fast, forcing my legs to obey, ignoring the fire in my wounds. The wraith followed, gliding effortlessly over the ground, moving faster now, sensing its prey was trying to escape.

The ruins rose before me—jagged pillars and collapsed walls, a skeleton of something that had once been great. I stumbled through the broken archway, my boots scuffing against moss-covered stone, and pressed my back to the nearest wall, sword drawn.

Silence.

The wraith hovered at the threshold, just beyond the ruined gate. It did not enter.

A grin pulled at my lips, sharp and knowing.

It could not.

The ruin was old. Older than this forest, older than the men who had built their villages in its shadow. There was power here, ancient and forgotten, but still lingering in the bones of the stone. Whatever ward had been carved into these walls had long since crumbled, but not enough. Not for a thing like this.

The wraith lingered at the edge, shifting, writhing, testing. It could not reach me.

Not yet.

I lowered myself against the cold stone floor, my sword resting across my lap. The wraith did not leave.

It would wait.

So would I.

Dawn would come. And with it, the light.

For now, I watched the dark, and it watched back.

Sleep took me, slow and heavy, dragging me beneath the weight of exhaustion. The wraith lingered at the threshold, its shadow shifting in the dim light of the dying embers, but it did not cross. It did not dare. It only watched.

When I woke, the first pale light of dawn had crept through the ruined walls. The air was cold, damp with the breath of morning, and the wraith was gone. No sign of it, no whisper in the wind. Just silence, save for the crackling of the last embers in the fire pit.

I stood, rolling my shoulders, feeling the stiffness in my wounds, the dull ache of bruises yet to fade. Another night survived. Another step forward.

I moved through the wilderness, the damp earth soft beneath my boots. The trees here were taller, gnarled things with thick roots that rose and twisted from the ground like veins in flesh. Moss clung to their trunks, slick with morning dew, and the air was thick with the scent of damp wood and rotting leaves. Somewhere in the distance, water called—a river, slow-moving, cutting through the valley ahead.

When I reached it, I crouched at the edge, scooping the cold water into my palms, drinking deep. The chill slid down my throat, washing away the taste of smoke and blood. I stripped off my cloak, my armor, letting the cold air bite at my skin before stepping into the shallows. The water swallowed me, shockingly cold, but it numbed the soreness in my limbs, washing away the sweat and dried blood.

As I rose from the river, a crow called from the branches above. A sharp, jarring cry that cut through the stillness.

I looked up. The black shape shifted on its perch, watching. Its dark little eyes knew something.

A bad omen.

I shook the water from my arms, pulled my armor back on, and kept moving.

The trees began to thin as the land sloped downward, the first hints of a valley opening ahead. I could see it in the distance—lowlands stretching out, hills rising on either side, the mist curling between them like restless ghosts.

Whatever lay ahead, I was walking straight into it.

The Cursed Tower

The valley stretched before me, swallowed in mist, an ocean of rolling fog that slithered over the land like a living thing. Trees jutted from the white haze like skeletal fingers reaching for the sky, their twisted limbs clawing at the gray heavens. Somewhere in the distance, water dripped, slow and steady, echoing through the silence like the heartbeat of something vast and unseen.

And there, rising from the shroud like a broken fang, stood the tower.

It loomed above the valley, black stone weathered by time, its narrow frame impossibly tall, defying the very weight of the sky. Vines clung to its base, creeping up the jagged walls, but they did not reach the windows. Nothing living touched those. A thick, shadowy mist curled around the base of the tower, writhing unnaturally, shifting like a living thing.

There was no light inside. No flickering lantern, no candle's glow. Only darkness. Watching. Waiting.

The villagers had spoken of it in hushed voices, spitting into the dirt after the name had left their lips. The sorcerer's tower. A cursed place, they had called it. A house of horrors, where the walls whispered and the dead did not rest.

Good.

I rolled my shoulder, feeling the dull ache where the elf's arrow had pierced me days ago. The wound had not festered. That was enough. I had made it this far.

And now I would take what was mine.

I stepped forward, boots crunching against the frostbitten grass, my breath curling in the frigid air. The mist curled away from me, like some unseen force recoiling at my presence.

The closer I came, the heavier the air became. A weight pressed against my chest, thick and suffocating, as if the tower itself was watching me, judging my worth, waiting to see if I would falter.

I grinned.

I did not falter.

The blackened gates stood open, yawning like a mouth eager to swallow me whole. Beyond them, a broken path of stone slabs led to the base of the tower, where a single, massive door waited. Old, iron-bound, scarred by time and claw marks that had dug deep into the wood.

Something had tried to get in once.

I placed a hand against the door. It was cold. Colder than the wind, colder than the grave.

And then, from within, a whisper.

Faint. Barely there. A voice not of man nor beast, curling through the cracks in the wood, hungry and ancient.

It did not say words. It only beckoned.

I pushed the door open and stepped inside.

The door groaned as it swung open, revealing nothing but pitch-black beyond. The air inside was thick, stale, heavy with the scent of dust and decay. The cold slithered over my skin, deeper than the night air outside.

Then came the sound.

A dry, scraping noise. Bone against stone.

I stepped inside.

The first shape rose from the shadows, then another, and another.

Skeletons.

Not the brittle, half-rotten husks found in shallow graves, but something fouler—animated remains, their bones blackened with age, hollow sockets glowing with faint, unnatural light. They wore the rusted remains of armor, jagged blades clutched in their bony fingers.

There were four of them, moving as one, silent as death itself.

I exhaled through my nose, adjusting my grip on my sword. I had fought men, beasts, elves, monsters. But the dead? The dead felt nothing. No fear. No hesitation. No pain.

But they still broke.

The first lunged. A rusted axe, heavy and jagged, arcing toward my skull. I shifted, sidestepping just enough to feel the wind of its swing, and brought my sword down in a brutal counter. My blade sheared through its clavicle, snapping ribs, shattering its spine. The thing collapsed in a heap, bones scattering across the cold stone floor.

The second came immediately, its sword stabbing straight for my gut. I twisted, barely avoiding the thrust, then seized its wrist with my free hand. The bone snapped under my grip, brittle and dry. Before it could react, I drove my boot into its chest, sending it flying backward into the wall with a sickening crunch. Its skull bounced off the stone and rolled away.

The third and fourth attacked together. One came high, the other low. Clever.

I ducked the overhead swing, feeling the rusted blade skim past my scalp. The one beneath aimed for my knee, its jagged dagger glinting in the dim torchlight. I pivoted hard, kicking the dagger-wielder square in the face, the impact sending its jaw snapping backward at an impossible angle. It dropped, twitching, skull half-caved in.

The last one was already recovering, raising its sword again, its bony grip unnaturally strong. I surged forward, meeting it head-on, smashing my pommel into its skull. The brittle bone fractured but did not break.

Fine. I would make sure it did.

I seized its head with both hands and twisted.

The vertebrae cracked, snapped, then shattered as I wrenched its skull clean from its spine. The body staggered once before collapsing, ribs clattering against the floor.

I turned, breathing heavy, the severed skull still clutched in my fist. Its dim eye sockets flickered weakly, whatever unnatural magic binding it together struggling to hold on.

I crushed it in my hand.

Bone crumbled into dust between my fingers. The final ember of life—if such a thing could be called life—faded into nothing.

The silence returned.

The broken remains of my enemies lay scattered at my feet, nothing more than lifeless bones once more. Whatever force had raised them had fled, and the tower stood still once again.

I rolled my shoulders, stepping over the shattered remains.

This was just the welcome.

Something far worse lay ahead.

The air inside the tower reeked of rot. Not the stale scent of long-dead things, but something worse—fresh decay, meat left too long in the sun, blood soured and thickened with time. It clung to my throat like oil, turning each breath into something heavy, something vile.

I pressed forward. The walls were lined with faded tapestries, their colors long devoured by age, depicting things that should have been forgotten—men burning, screaming, their souls twisted into wretched shapes, shackled by shadowy figures with hollow eyes. The stone beneath my boots was damp, slick with something I chose not to identify.

Then I heard it.

A low, wet sound. Like flesh shifting against stone. Like something breathing that had no right to breathe.

I stepped into a vast chamber, the ceiling swallowed by darkness, the walls lined with ancient iron sconces, each holding a sickly green flame. At the center of the room stood an altar of black stone, veins of red pulsing like a dying heart. And beside it...

It rose from the shadows, hunched and grotesque, its form a nightmare of stitched flesh and jagged bone. A thing built from the dead, pieced together from what had once been men, beasts, things worse than both. Its torso was bloated and misshapen, its ribs poking through gray, leathery skin. One of its arms was too long, ending in a clawed hand with fingers like rusted meat hooks. The other arm was skeletal, strips of rotting flesh still clinging to the bone, ending in a jagged blade fused into its very flesh.

And its head—gods, its head.

It was not one skull, but many. Twisted together, mouths gaping, empty sockets weeping dark ichor. Some still had teeth, others shattered, their jaws locked in frozen screams. They moved, whispering, wailing. Voices of the damned.

The thing saw me. And it charged.

I barely moved in time. It swung its massive claw, the sheer force of the blow carving deep into the stone where I had stood. I rolled aside, rising with my sword at the ready, but the monster was fast—faster than anything so bloated and grotesque had a right to be.

It lunged again. I parried, my blade scraping against the metal embedded in its arm, but the force sent a shock through my wrist. I twisted, bringing my sword up, slicing deep into its stomach.

The thing barely reacted.

Instead, it roared, the multiple mouths on its fused skulls shrieking in unison. The sound curdled the air, made my vision blur at the edges. Dark magic. Foul, unnatural magic.

I gritted my teeth, driving forward. My blade flashed, cutting deep into one of its many throats, severing the cords of rotting flesh. A head tumbled free, its mouth still wailing even as it hit the floor.

The creature staggered, but only for a moment. It slammed its clawed hand into my side, raking deep.

Pain ripped through me, burning, sharp. I grunted, feeling warmth spill down my ribs—blood, my blood.

Enough.

I twisted with the blow, using the momentum to drive my sword straight into the thing's chest. The blade punched through flesh and bone, burying itself to the hilt.

The creature howled, jerking back, but I held firm. With a savage snarl, I wrenched my blade sideways, carving through its grotesque ribcage, slicing its wretched, rotting heart in half.

It spasmed, the twisted mouths on its skulls letting out one last, pitiful wail.

Then it collapsed.

The black altar pulsed one final time. Then, whatever dark magic had sustained this abomination flickered and died.

I stood over the corpse, panting, my side aching, my sword slick with dark blood. The wretched thing twitched once, then lay still.

This was no ordinary guardian. Someone—something—had built this. Had raised it, fed it, commanded it.

The sorcerer knew I was coming.

Good. Let him wait.

I wiped my blade clean and pressed onward.

I walked into a chamber that was thick with dust and the weight of ages. Shelves lined the walls, carved from the same black stone as the tower, their surfaces warped with time. Books—hundreds of them—sat in uneven stacks, bound in cracked leather and strange, fleshy parchment, their spines etched with symbols I did not recognize. The air smelled of old ink, dried blood, and something fouler, a lingering scent of decay that no time could erase.

I reached for one, pulling it from the shelf. The cover was black as night, embossed with a silver sigil of an eyeless skull, its hollow mouth twisted in silent laughter. The title, scrawled in ancient runes, was faded but legible: "The Devouring Tongue of Malakarith."

I flipped it open. The pages were brittle, but the ink was fresh, as if the words had been rewritten by unseen hands long after their author had turned to dust.

"...And in the depths of the black sun's shadow, the flesh is unmade, the blood unwoven. He who speaks the forgotten words shall open the first of the Seven Gates, and beyond lies only hunger..."

The next page was an illustration, drawn in deep crimson ink—perhaps not ink at all. A figure stood upon an altar, arms raised, while tendrils of darkness spiraled from his mouth, reaching toward a mass of writhing forms—human, almost, but wrong, their limbs twisted, their faces featureless save for gaping mouths frozen in silent screams.

I shut the book and pulled another.

"The Oath of Xel'Vareth"—its binding was cracked, the leather rough beneath my fingers. A faint coppery scent clung to it. Blood, old and dry. The pages within were written in a spidery script, filled with passages on binding souls to metal, caging spirits in flesh, and weaving agony into the bones of the living.

I skimmed a passage:

"To carve the sigil upon the flesh is to mark the soul beyond death. One cut for pain, two for the binding, three for the soul's unraveling. The victim must be aware. The agony must be true. Without suffering, the pact is hollow."

Beneath it, another illustration—this one etched with burning precision. A naked man knelt, his body covered in deep carvings, lines curling like thorned vines. His eyes had been removed, black pits in his face. Chains of living shadow wound around him, tightening as if dragging his soul from his body.

I exhaled, closing the book.

The table before me was littered with more than just books. Old quills, some fashioned from the bones of birds, lay beside vials of blackened ink, their contents thick and congealed with time. Rolled parchments bore half-finished maps—one sketched with sigils, marking points of interest with names long forgotten, another depicting what looked like a city that no longer existed.

A dried heart, shriveled and black, sat in a tarnished bowl. The edges of the organ were etched with runes, burned deep into the flesh. Beside it, a collection of ritual daggers, their blades stained and chipped, their hilts wrapped in faded silk.

Tall candles, melted to their bases, had pooled wax across the wooden desk, their wicks long dead but the scent of burnt tallow still lingering.

I set a hand on the desk, running my fingers across the warped wood. The knowledge in this room was older than the tower itself. I could feel it—watching, whispering, waiting for hands willing to unearth its secrets.

I smirked.

I would not disappoint it.

The corridors stretched endlessly, their black stone walls slick with damp, the air heavy with dust and the staleness of time. My boots echoed against the cold floor, the sound swallowed by the pressing silence that filled the tower like a tomb. The torches along the walls flickered weakly, their flames unnatural, burning low with a sickly green hue. Shadows danced, stretching and shifting, moving as if they had a will of their own.

I ran my fingers along the uneven stone as I walked, feeling the etched carvings, the worn grooves where countless hands had traced the same path before me. Strange sigils and arcane script covered the walls, unreadable but filled with a presence that hummed against my skin.

The passage sloped downward, and I descended, the steps spiraling into darkness. The deeper I went, the colder the air became, thick with the scent of old parchment, burnt wax, and something fouler—something that had been alive once, but no longer. Each step took me further from the world above, deeper into the heart of whatever waited below.

I arrived to a chamber that was a vast, yawning space, lit only by the eerie green glow of rune-etched braziers. The walls, once smooth stone, were now lined with pulsating veins of dark magic, writhing like living things just beneath the surface. The very air hummed with power—wrong, unnatural, ancient.

At the far end of the room, atop a throne carved from blackened bones, sat the sorcerer.

He was old—older than any mortal man should be. His flesh clung to his bones like paper stretched too thin, his skin a sickly gray, veins blackened with whatever corruption had sustained him past his years. His eyes, sunken deep into his skull, gleamed with black light. His fingers, long and claw-like, rested lazily on the armrests of his throne, adorned with rings that pulsed with enchantment.

He smiled, a slow, knowing thing, as if he had been expecting me.

"You made quite a mess on your way here," he mused, his voice as dry as crumbling parchment. "The elves. The beast. My little... experiments. Yet you live. Fascinating."

I didn't answer. Words were for those who needed them. I strode forward, my blade low, ready.

The sorcerer let out a low chuckle. "Ah, straight to business. No curiosity? No demands? No questions as to why I have what you seek?"

I stopped a few paces away, my grip tightening. "I don't care why. I care where."

His withered lips curled in amusement. "The amulet," he said, voice barely above a whisper, and I felt the air tremble at the word. "You think it is simply power to be taken. A tool. A weapon. You know nothing of what you seek, warrior."

I moved a step closer. "Then enlighten me. Before I take it from your corpse."

He grinned. "Ah, but why waste blood and breath on such petty violence? Why fight when you could simply take what you desire—without consequence?"

The air grew heavy, thick, pressing against my skin like invisible hands. A slow, creeping sensation curled around my mind, an intrusion, subtle at first—then stronger, more insistent.

"You want power," the sorcerer whispered, his voice slipping into my thoughts, sliding through the cracks in my will. "More than this. More than steel and brute force. More than endless wandering, killing, bleeding. I can give it to you."

Visions flickered behind my eyes. Strength beyond flesh. The very shadows bending at my command. Villages burned with a thought, kings kneeling, begging at my feet. The world breaking, reshaped by my will alone.

No more hunger. No more pain. No more limits.

"All you must do," the sorcerer continued, rising slowly from his throne, his ancient fingers twitching with dark energy, "is kneel."

I stared at him. At the power writhing just beyond my reach.

And I grinned.

"Kneel?" I echoed, rolling my shoulders, shifting my grip on my sword. "You must be senile, old man."

The sorcerer sighed, shaking his head. "Such a shame."

Then he raised his hand, and the room erupted with darkness.

The darkness surged toward me, thick and writhing, moving like a living thing. Cold tendrils lashed at my skin, coiling around my limbs, pulling, dragging, trying to drown me in the abyss. My body screamed against the crushing force, the weight of a hundred whispered curses pressing into my skull.

I fought.

Teeth bared, I surged forward, my sword cutting through the black like fire through fog. The sorcerer's laughter slithered through the room, hollow and mocking. His form flickered in the shadows, shifting, multiplying, moving impossibly fast.

"You cannot kill what does not die," his voice echoed, a dozen voices layered atop one another, old and hungry. "You cannot strike what is beyond the flesh."

I ignored him.

Instead, I listened. Beneath the illusions, beneath the crawling magic, there was breath. Weak, but present. A heartbeat. The truth beneath the lie.

I turned sharply, dodging a tendril of black mist as it lashed toward my throat, and hurled my dagger into the darkness.

The sorcerer gasped.

The illusions flickered.

The shadows trembled.

I charged.

He tried to retreat, skeletal fingers clutching at his side where my dagger had struck, black ichor spilling from the wound. Whatever unnatural power had sustained him, whatever dark whispers had promised him eternity, it had not made him immune to steel.

I seized him by the throat, slamming him against his own cursed throne. His frail body was lighter than it should have been, like the bones of a man already half-turned to dust.

His eyes widened, yellow and fever-bright. "You... fool..."

I didn't let him finish.

My blade plunged into his chest, cutting deep, severing whatever foul magic still tethered his wretched soul to his corpse.

The tower screamed.

A pulse of energy rippled through the stone, the torches flaring with unnatural light before dying entirely, leaving only the dying glow of the sorcerer's eyes as his lips twisted into something between agony and laughter.

Then he was gone.

His body crumbled, flesh withering, bones collapsing into themselves until nothing remained but dust and the faint, lingering stench of death. The throne beneath him cracked, a long, jagged split forming down the center.

The air was still.

I exhaled, rolling my shoulders, the ghost of his voice still clawing at the edges of my mind. He had been right about one thing—I did not know the full nature of the amulet.

But I would.

His chamber was lined with books, scrolls, scattered notes—his life's work, if a creature like him could be said to have ever truly lived. I tore through them, tossing aside brittle tomes written in tongues I did not care to decipher, until I found what I needed.

A single, unmarked journal, its pages worn but legible. I flipped through it, scanning the hastily scribbled notes, the diagrams, the ancient symbols. And there, between the faded ink and desperate markings, I found it.

The amulet was not here.

It had been taken long ago, traded, lost, passed into the hands of another. Not a man, not a sorcerer, but something else.

The Dwarves.

I clenched my fist, the weight of the moment settling over me. The old fool had been little more than a scavenger, clinging to scraps of a power he had never truly possessed.

I stuffed the journal into my pack and stood.

The sorcerer was dead. His tower would rot. But my path was clear.

The mines of the north awaited. And with them, the amulet.

Steel and Sorcery

The mountain outpost reeked of sweat, blood, and bad ale.

Built into the jagged slopes of the northern range, it was little more than a collection of stone hovels, leaning timber structures, and a crude wooden palisade that had long since rotted in places. Smoke curled from squat chimneys, mingling with the ever-present mist that clung to the cliffs like a shroud. The banners above the gate were mismatched—some belonged to mercenary bands, others to fallen lords whose names had long since turned to dust.

This was not a place of kings or kingdoms. It was a den of killers, thieves, and the wretched souls who had nowhere else to go.

My kind of place.

I passed through the gates without challenge. There were no guards, no sentries—only men leaning in the shadows, watching with the cold gaze of predators weighing the worth of fresh meat. I met their stares without flinching. I had no coin worth stealing. Only steel, and the promise of its use.

The streets were little more than winding paths of packed dirt and loose stone, the ground slick from melted snow and the runoff of things less pure. Stalls lined the alleys, selling weapons rusted from disuse, dried meats of questionable origin, and trinkets stolen from the graves of better men.

A fight broke out to my left. Two men, one broad and scarred, the other wiry and wild-eyed, tore into each other with dull knives, their breath fogging in the cold air as they struggled. No one moved to stop them. The crowd barely glanced up.

One of them would be dead in minutes. The other would spend his winnings on ale and whores. That was the way of things here.

I moved past them, my boots crunching against the frost-bitten ground, until I reached the center of the outpost—a large, sagging building with a sign that had long since lost its name, though the bloodstains on the door spoke of its purpose well enough.

A tavern.

The heart of every lawless place. The source of rumors, wagers, and bodies left cooling on ale-soaked floors.

I pushed the door open. The air inside was thick with the stench of drink, unwashed bodies, and the acrid bite of cheap tobacco. The fire in the hearth burned low, casting flickering shadows over the faces of sellswords, bandits, and deserters who had fled from wars they were too weak to win.

They all had stories. None of them mattered.

I strode to the counter, tossing a coin down hard enough to make the barkeep flinch. "Ale. Strong."

He poured without a word.

I drank deep, the bitter swill burning down my throat, then wiped my mouth on the back of my hand.

The amulet was here, or at least the next step toward it. Someone in this cesspit would know.

And if they didn't, I would make them.

The inn stank of sweat, old ale, and piss, but the worst of it clung to the innkeeper himself—a fat, greasy bastard, his stained apron stretched tight over his gut, a thin, curled mustache twitching above his cracked lips. I swear I saw lice in his mustache. He eyed me like a man weighing a sack of rotten grain, knowing there was coin inside but wondering if it was worth touching.

I slammed a few coins onto the bar. "I'm looking for something."

He grunted, barely glancing at the silver. "Not my problem."

I leaned in, lowering my voice. "An amulet. Dwarven make. Black stone, old magic. You hear of it?"

His fingers twitched, and for a brief moment, his beady little eyes darted sideways, out toward the rowdy mercenaries at the back tables. His lips pressed together, his mustache trembling.

I caught the hesitation.

"Talk."

The innkeeper licked his lips, nervous now. "I don't—"

I grabbed his filthy apron, yanking him halfway over the bar. The stench of old beer and piss-soaked cloth hit me like a corpse baking in the sun.

He yelped. "Alright, alright!"

I let him go, watching as he wiped his greasy hands down his apron, eyes darting toward the largest man in the room—a mountain of muscle, sitting alone in the corner, his greatsword resting against the table like a companion in waiting. His arms were thick with scars, his armor piecemeal, and his knuckles bruised from fights that had ended worse for the other man.

"That's Korrak the Breaker," the innkeeper muttered. "Champion of the pits. Ain't a man alive in this place who's bested him."

I followed his gaze, studying the brute.

The innkeeper swallowed hard, lowering his voice. “They say he used to fight for the dwarves, took coin from Durnharg himself. If anyone knows what that bastard king keeps locked in his vault, it’s him.”

I picked up my coins from the bar and pocketed them.

The innkeeper scowled but didn’t say a word.

The tavern was thick with mercenaries, cutthroats, and deserters—men who had seen war and men who had run from it. They drank, gambled, eyed each other like wolves testing for weakness. But that man sat apart from the rest, his presence undeniable.

The champion.

He was massive, built like a warhorse, his arms thick with muscle, his face a collection of old scars that told of battles survived. His armor —leather and chain, dented plates, trophies taken from the dead.

More than a few men glanced my way as I approached him. They smelled blood in the air, the promise of violence.

I stopped at his table and kicked out the chair across from him. It scraped against the floor, the sound cutting through the low murmur of the room.

His cold, gray eyes lifted to meet mine.

“You’re in my light,” he grunted.

I smirked. “Then let’s take it outside.”

He exhaled slowly, setting his tankard down. “And why would I do that?”

“Because I need answers,” I said, tapping my fingers against the hilt of my sword. “And I don’t ask twice.”

A flicker of amusement crossed his ruined face. He glanced around the room, noting the eyes watching us, the way the tension coiled in the air like a drawn bowstring.

He stood.

The crowd shifted as he stepped away from the table, grabbing his greatsword with a lazy grip, the blade’s weight barely seeming to register in his hands.

“You want a duel for information?” he mused, rolling his shoulders, the steel in his grip gleaming under the dim firelight. “Fine. But you better pray you can still talk when I’m done with you.”

A few men chuckled, placing bets under their breath.

I just smiled. “Bring it on.”

We stepped out into the cold, the onlookers following like carrion birds sensing a fresh kill. The dirt square in front of the tavern was the perfect place for bloodshed—trampled from years of fights, soaked in the ghosts of old battles.

The champion cracked his neck, swinging his sword once, testing the air. “No rules. No second chances.”

“Wouldn’t want them.”

He lunged first, faster than a man his size had any right to be. His greatsword came down in a brutal arc, meant to split me in half.

I sidestepped, feeling the wind of the blade as it crashed into the ground, sending up a spray of dirt and frost. Before he could recover, I twisted, lashing out with my own sword, aiming for his exposed ribs.

He blocked—barely—gritting his teeth as steel met steel, the force sending a shudder up both our arms.

Good. He wasn’t slow.

This would be fun.

The champion came at me again, his greatsword a blur of steel and fury. I dodged, just barely, feeling the wind of his swing carve through the air where my head had been a heartbeat before. He was strong—brutally so—but I had fought stronger. Strength alone didn’t win fights.

I twisted, slashing at his side. He blocked, sparks flying as our blades clashed, but I had already stepped in close, too close for his massive sword to be of use.

I drove my knee into his gut.

The breath left him in a grunt, but he was quick—his fist lashed out, catching me across the jaw like a hammer. Pain exploded through my skull, my vision flickering, and I staggered back just as his greatsword came again, arcing toward my ribs.

I barely managed to parry, the force of the blow sending a tremor down my arm. My muscles screamed, but I gritted my teeth and held firm.

The bastard grinned. “Not bad.”

I spat blood onto the dirt. “Not done.”

He attacked again, relentless. I ducked under a sweeping strike, feeling the heat of his blade skim past my scalp, and lunged low, driving my shoulder into his ribs. He stumbled, just for a breath, and that was all I needed.

I slammed my elbow into his jaw.

He snarled, swinging blindly. I weaved past it and caught his wrist, twisting hard until I heard the wet *crack* of bone snapping. He roared, dropping his sword, but I wasn't finished.

I drove my boot into the side of his knee, another sickening *pop* filling the air as the joint bent the wrong way. He crumpled, snarling, spitting curses, but still trying to rise.

I stepped forward and raked my fingers across his face, digging deep into his left eye.

He screamed.

I twisted, feeling the soft tissue rupture under my grip, warm and wet as it oozed between my fingers. He flailed wildly, catching me across the ribs with a desperate punch, but it was weak now—sloppy, unfocused.

I drove my forehead into his nose, shattering cartilage. Blood gushed down his face, mixing with the dirt beneath us.

The crowd murmured, shifting, some laughing, others grimacing. A few of them had bet against me. Fools.

The champion fell onto his back, panting, his face ruined, one hand cradling the mess where his eye had been. His good eye flickered up to me, glassy, filled with rage and pain.

I planted my boot on his chest and pressed down, just enough to remind him who had won.

"Now," I breathed, wiping his blood from my hand onto my tunic, "tell me what I want to know before I take the other one."

The champion writhed beneath my boot, blood pooling in the dirt around his shattered face. His breath came in ragged gasps, his ruined eye leaking down his cheek, his broken knee twisted unnaturally beneath him. He was finished. The fight had left him.

But pain? That still clung to him like a second skin.

I pressed my boot down harder, grinding against his ribs. He groaned, his remaining eye rolling back for a moment before focusing on me.

"The amulet," I said, voice calm, steady. "Where is it?"

He spat blood, dark and thick, splattering against my boot.

"Don't test me," I warned. "You think I fought fair back there? That was mercy. If I have to start pulling pieces off, it'll take you hours to die."

A hoarse chuckle rattled from his throat, cut short by another groan of pain. "You fight like a dog," he rasped, his good eye flickering with something between hatred and grudging respect. "No honor."

"Honor's for the dead," I said flatly. "Start talking, or join them."

He took a shuddering breath. I could see the moment he realized the truth—he wasn't walking away from this. If I didn't kill him, the infection from his wounds would. He was already dead.

Might as well be useful before he rotted.

He coughed, a wet, broken sound. "The amulet... it's not here," he muttered, voice barely above a breath. "Gone... traded..."

I leaned in. "Where?"

His hand twitched at his side, fingers curling weakly. "North," he gasped. "The mines. The dwarves."

My eyes narrowed. "Which mines?"

"The Irondeep Warrens... past the frozen pass." His voice wavered, fading. "Given to... their king. Part of a deal... he paid well for it. Wanted it bad."

A dwarven king. Interesting.

I eased my boot off his chest. He coughed again, struggling to breathe, his body shuddering from the effort. He wouldn't last much longer.

"The king's name?" I asked, crouching beside him.

He blinked sluggishly, his body barely holding together. "Durnharg," he rasped. "Durnharg the Black. That's who has it now."

I knew the name. A ruthless bastard, even by dwarven standards. A warlord turned king, ruling over the deep mines with a fist of iron and a hunger for power. If he had the amulet, he wouldn't part with it easily.

But he would part with it.

One way or another.

I stood, wiping the blood from my blade with the edge of my cloak. The champion's breath was slowing now, his body sinking deeper into the dirt. He was slipping away.

He looked up at me, his good eye glazing over. "You got what you wanted," he muttered. "Now... finish it."

I considered him. Then I turned and walked away.

Let the cold or the scavengers take him. It made no difference to me.

I had a king to kill.

The champion died sometime after I left, whether by blood loss, the cold, or the boot of some bastard eager to loot his corpse. It didn't matter. His usefulness had run dry, and I had bigger things ahead of me.

The lodging house was small, built into the roots of an ancient tree, its wooden walls carved with delicate elven patterns now worn and faded by time. The elf woman who owned it was quiet, distant, neither welcoming nor hostile—just another keeper of a place where wandering men left coin and took nothing else. I paid her without a word, took the key, and found my way to the narrow room at the back, its only window looking out into the dense, mist-laden forest beyond.

I slept. For days, I slept.

The exhaustion had crept in without warning, pressing me into the thin hay mattress, dragging me into deep, uneasy dreams. I saw faces, half-formed and whispering, their mouths moving without sound. Fire burned in the distance, a city crumbling, but when I turned to look, it was gone—replaced by a shifting, endless void that breathed like a living thing.

I woke in a sweat, gripping the hilt of my sword, the early light pale and cold through the window. My breath came slow, measured. The dream was gone, but the feeling remained.

By the third day, my body had recovered. The aches dulled, the wounds no longer stiff when I moved. I stripped down and made my way to the bathing chamber, where a wide, stone basin was filled with steaming water drawn from a nearby spring. I stepped in, letting the heat seep into my skin, washing away the grime of travel, the dried blood, the weight of days spent killing and running and killing again. I let myself sink lower, the water lapping at my throat.

For the first time in weeks, I felt almost human.

Later, I sat in the small courtyard outside the house, eating a simple meal of roasted venison and black bread, tearing into it with the slow patience of a man who had known hunger too well. The elf woman watched from a distance, saying nothing, her green eyes unreadable as she poured fresh tea into a small clay cup and set it beside me before disappearing back inside.

I took a pull from my flask instead, letting the burn of spirits chase away the last of the dream's grip, then lit my pipe, inhaling the thick, bitter smoke. The wind carried the scent of wet leaves and distant rain, the trees swaying like silent sentinels around the house.

But before I set off for the frozen north, I had one last night to kill.

I found my way back to the tavern, where the air was thick with pipe smoke and the bitter stench of sweat and cheap ale. The crowd had seen the fight. Some nodded in approval, others avoided my gaze entirely. A few eyed me with the kind of hatred that only comes from losing a bet.

I didn't care.

I slammed a handful of coins onto the bar, the ones I'd stripped from the champion's belt before I left him to die. "Dragon's Breath," I growled. "And keep it coming."

The barkeep obliged. The first gulp burned like fire down my throat. The second was smoother. By the third, my eyesight started swimming slightly.

A hand landed on my shoulder. Heavy, calloused, firm. I turned, already curling my fist in anticipation of another fight.

Instead, I found a dwarven woman grinning up at me, her green eyes sharp, her auburn beard neatly braided with silver bands. She was stout, strong, the kind of woman who looked like she could take a punch and throw one twice as hard.

"Heard ye broke that big bastard like a dry twig," she said, voice thick with ale and amusement. "Haven't seen a human fight that dirty in years."

I smirked. "He had it coming."

She leaned against the bar, knocking back her own drink. "I like that," she said, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. "So, what's next for ye, warrior?"

I drained my whiskey and set the glass down hard. "North," I said. "The dwarven mines. I've got business with your kind."

Her eyebrow arched. "That so?"

I shrugged. "Some dwarf-king has something I want."

She laughed, low and rough. "Careful, lad. Durnharg doesn't take kindly to things bein' taken from him."

"Then he'll die tired," I muttered.

That seemed to amuse her. She tilted her head, studying me like a merchant weighing steel. Then, without warning, she grabbed the front of my tunic and yanked me closer. "Come on then," she said, her voice thick with hunger. "Let's see if ye fight as well in a bed as ye do in the dirt."

I grinned.

The night passed in a blur of sweat, drink, and the kind of reckless pleasure only a warrior knows—one that comes when you've killed, when you've won, when you're certain the gods themselves will have to cut you down to stop you.

By dawn, my head ached, my body was bruised in ways that had nothing to do with battle, and the warmth of the dwarf woman's skin was already fading from my memory.

I dressed, buckled my sword to my back, and stepped out into the cold morning air.

The Irondeep Warrens awaited. And with them, my prize.

The land grew harsher with each passing day, the low valleys giving way to steep hills, and then to the jagged teeth of the mountains rising ahead. The ground became rough, littered with loose rock and dry, twisted pines that clawed at the sky like skeletal hands. The wind howled through the cliffs, carrying with it the distant cry of wolves, but none dared come too close.

At dusk, I found a cold, clear stream snaking through a ravine, its waters deep enough for fish. I set down my pack, gathering a few fallen branches for a fire before fashioning a simple trap from thin branches and woven reeds. I set it in the water, weighted with stones, then sat back and watched the current do the work.

By nightfall, the trap had caught three silver-scaled fish, thrashing weakly as I pulled them from the water. I gutted them with a few clean strokes, skewered them on a spit, and roasted them over the fire. The fat dripped into the flames, crackling, sending up a scent that made my stomach twist with hunger.

I pulled out a flask of Blackheart Mead, uncorking it with my teeth. The first gulp was thick and bitter, the honey buried beneath something darker, something strong enough to make my skull hum. I tore into the crispy fish, eating it with rough bread, feeling the warmth of the meal settle deep in my gut.

For once, I was satisfied.

The days passed in a blur of walking, climbing, and cursing the gods for making mountains so steep. Each night, I made camp wherever I could—beneath an overhanging rock, tucked between gnarled roots, or in the shadow of some crumbling ruin long abandoned by time.

My nights were filled with the crackling of the fire, the sharp bite of Blackheart Mead, and the occasional sounds of something moving in the darkness beyond my firelight. Some nights, I set simple traps for game, catching fat hares or stringy mountain birds. Other nights, I ate hard bread and dried meat, cursing my luck.

By the seventh day, I crested a high ridge, my legs burning from the climb, the path ahead still stretching toward higher peaks lost in the clouds. The mountain pass was near, and with it, the next step toward what I had come for.

It was late afternoon when I heard it—a high-pitched, wailing sob echoing through the rocky pass. I frowned, slowing my pace, hand resting on my sword hilt. The sound was pathetic.

I followed it around a bend and found the source—a halfling sitting on a rock, sobbing into his tiny hands. His curly brown hair was a mess, his clothes covered in dirt, and his round face twisted in misery.

I stared. He sobbed harder.

“What in the hells is wrong with you?” I asked, crossing my arms.

He sniffled, hiccupped, and pointed at the ground. I followed his finger, expecting to see a dead friend, a stolen treasure, maybe even a monster lurking nearby.

Instead, I saw a broken wheel of cheese lying in the dirt.

I blinked. “You’re crying... over cheese?”

The halfling nodded miserably.

I couldn’t stop it. I laughed. A full, deep belly laugh, the kind that made my ribs ache.

The halfling’s face went red, his tiny fists clenching, but that only made it worse.

I wiped a tear from my eye. “Let me get this straight—you dropped your cheese, and now the gods themselves have forsaken you?”

“It was a fine cheese!” he squeaked, glaring up at me with the fury of a thousand suns.

I shook my head, still grinning. “Then eat it off the damn ground.”

He gasped, as if I had suggested he drink orc piss from a boot.

I walked away, still chuckling.

The world was full of madness and misery, but this? This was the funniest damn thing I had seen in weeks.

The path narrowed as I climbed higher, the air growing thin, cold wind biting at my skin like unseen teeth. The ground beneath my boots was rough and uneven, a mix of broken stone and old dwarven masonry, half-buried beneath centuries of rockslides.

Then, I saw it—the entrance to the mines, carved into the mountainside like a gaping wound. The massive iron doors were old but sturdy, their surfaces etched with runes that still faintly pulsed, as if whispering warnings to those who dared enter. Cracked statues of dwarven warriors flanked the entrance, their once-proud visages worn smooth by time and wind, their weapons rusted, broken, or missing altogether.

A faint sulfuric smell lingered in the air, carried from the depths of the mountain, mixing with the distant, rhythmic thudding of hammers on stone. The mines were not abandoned.

Something still lived here.

The Deep Roads

I stepped into the tunnels, leaving the howling winds of the northern peaks behind, and was immediately met with the oppressive weight of the deep earth. The air was thick, damp, choked with the scent of sweat, ore, and the slow-burning fires of the forges that never slept. The deeper I went, the more the smell of iron dominated, laced with something older, something bitter—stone dust and old death.

The tunnels twisted downward, carved from the bones of the mountains, wide enough for carts of blackened rock to be hauled toward the surface by thick-armed dwarves with soot-streaked faces. Torchlight flickered against the jagged walls, casting long shadows that danced with every flicker of flame.

Dwarves moved about their work, hammering steel, driving picks into stubborn rock, hauling loads of unrefined ore in great wooden carts. They spoke little, their voices low and rough, their eyes flicking toward me with equal parts wariness and contempt.

I was an outsider. A man in dwarven halls. And men were rarely welcomed here.

A pair of guards watched me from beneath thick helmets, their hands resting easily on the hafts of their axes. They did not move to stop me—not yet. But their eyes tracked my every step, measuring, waiting.

The deeper tunnels loomed ahead, where the real mines began—past the forges, past the laborers, down into the black depths where only the bold or the foolish walked unguarded.

I was both.

The walls tightened as I descended, the ceiling pressing lower, the torches growing fewer. The air turned stagnant, filled with the distant clang of metal on stone, the rhythmic pounding of a hundred hammers shaping steel.

Somewhere beyond these tunnels, Durnharg the Black sat atop his throne of iron and gold, clutching the amulet that should have been mine.

And I was coming to take it.

The deeper I went, the quieter the tunnels became. The sounds of hammers and dwarven voices faded behind me, swallowed by the heavy silence of the abandoned shafts. The air was colder here, damp with unseen moisture dripping from the jagged ceiling, pooling in the cracks of the stone floor.

Then I smelled them.

Goblins.

The stench hit first—sour, like old sweat and rotting meat, mixed with the coppery tang of dried blood. It clung to the air, thick and rancid. I slowed my pace, rolling my shoulders, my grip tightening around my sword hilt.

Then I saw them.

A flicker of movement in the dark. Beady eyes glinting in the dim torchlight. The scrape of rusted blades against stone.

They moved fast, skittering low, spreading out, circling. Six of them. Maybe more lurking in the dark.

I bared my teeth. Good.

The first rushed me from the left, its jagged spear stabbing toward my ribs. I sidestepped, grabbed the shaft, and wrenched it from the goblin's grasp before slamming the blunt end into its throat. It crumpled with a gurgling wheeze, clutching at its crushed windpipe.

The second and third attacked together. One leapt at me, dagger flashing, aiming for my neck. I caught it midair, drove my sword up through its belly, and twisted. Its shriek turned to a wet gargle as I tossed the body aside.

The other was faster, slicing at my leg. I let the blade cut, let the pain sharpen me, then stomped down on its foot, shattering bone. It screeched, and I seized its head, slamming it into the tunnel wall until its skull split like a rotten fruit.

The remaining goblins hesitated, watching me with their narrow, wicked eyes. I could smell their fear now, sharp and bitter beneath their filth.

One turned to run.

I hurled the stolen spear. The crude tip punched through its back, pinning it to the tunnel floor.

The last two howled and charged.

I met them head-on. My blade carved through the first goblin's shoulder, cutting deep, nearly cleaving it in half. Its entrails spilled onto the stone, steaming in the cold air.

The last one tried to flee.

I caught it by the scruff of its mangy hide and drove my dagger into the base of its skull. It stiffened, twitching, then went limp.

Silence returned.

I exhaled, rolling my shoulders, flicking goblin blood from my sword. Their corpses lay scattered at my feet, the acrid stink of death mixing with the damp earth.

If they were here, there were more. Goblins never traveled alone.

I stepped over the bodies and kept moving.

Let them send more. I would kill them all.

I didn't hear them coming.

One moment, I was moving through the tunnels, stepping over the still-warm corpses of the goblins I had slaughtered. The next, a heavy impact slammed into the back of my skull, and the world tilted sideways.

I staggered, blinking through the sudden blur of torchlight and stone. Before I could react, something hard crashed into my ribs, knocking the breath from my lungs.

A voice snarled in the dark. Rough. Guttural. Dwarven.

"Drop the steel, human."

I tasted blood in my mouth.

Instinct took over. I twisted, sword flashing as I lunged toward the nearest shadow. My blade met steel mid-swing, the force jarring through my arms. A second later, something struck my knee from behind, and I collapsed onto the stone with a grunt.

Boots stomped forward, heavy and sure. Thick hands seized my arms, yanking them back, forcing me down.

More dwarves emerged from the darkness, their armor thick, their beards braided with iron bands. I counted six, maybe more in the shadows. They had me surrounded, axes drawn, their expressions a mix of grim satisfaction and cold fury.

I tried to push up, but a boot drove into my spine, pinning me in place.

Another dwarf stepped into view, taller than the rest, his beard streaked with gray, his armor battered from a hundred battles. His eyes, black as coal, narrowed as he crouched beside me.

"You made a mess back there, outsider," he grunted, nodding toward the direction I had come from. "A whole goblin pack, torn apart like pig meat."

I grinned through the blood in my teeth. "You're welcome."

His fist cracked against my jaw. Stars exploded behind my eyes.

"You think we needed your help, manling?" he spat. "You think we don't keep our own tunnels clean?"

I worked my jaw, rolling my tongue over my teeth. None were loose. That was good.

"I don't care what you do," I muttered. "I'm here for Durnharg."

The dwarves exchanged glances. A shift in posture, an unspoken conversation. They knew the name.

The leader snorted. "Oh, you'll meet him, alright."

I felt the blunt end of an axe handle crack against my skull.

The world spun. Then everything went dark.

I woke to the sound of chains clanking against stone. My wrists ached, bound tightly in iron shackles, my arms stretched just enough to keep me uncomfortable but not enough to dislocate anything.

The room was dim, lit only by the flickering glow of braziers, their light casting long shadows against the rough stone walls. The air was thick with smoke, sweat, and the heavy scent of damp iron.

And before me, seated upon a throne of blackened steel and gold, was Durnharg the Black.

The dwarven king leaned forward, his thick fingers tapping against the armrest of his seat. His beard was long, streaked with silver, his face carved from years of war and rule. His armor was layered in dark metal, each piece etched with ancient runes that shimmered faintly in the low light.

His eyes locked onto mine. Cold. Calculating. Amused.

"So," he rumbled, voice deep as a cavern's echo. "This is the bastard who's come sniffing through my halls."

He leaned back, resting one massive hand over the pommel of a great hammer at his side.

"Tell me, manling... why shouldn't I have you flayed alive for setting foot in my domain?"

Durnharg's black eyes bore into me, weighing, measuring, amused but not fooled. He had the look of a man—no, a king—who had seen too many fools bleed out at his feet to be impressed by bravado.

I pulled against the chains, testing them. Solid. No rust, no weakness. The dwarves built their prisons the same way they built their fortresses—unyielding.

I smirked. "I didn't crawl into this pit to trade words, dwarf. I came for the amulet."

The room went silent. The dwarves standing guard stiffened, their hands tightening around the hafts of their axes.

Durnharg exhaled through his nose. "The amulet," he repeated, like he was rolling the word over his tongue, tasting it. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "And what makes you think I would hand such a thing over to a filthy, gods-cursed human?"

"I could kill you and take it," I said, matter-of-fact.

The guards bristled. Durnharg just grinned.

"Oh, aye?" he chuckled. "That'd be quite the trick, manling. Your wrists are bound, your sword's been taken, and I don't much fancy your chances against half a dozen of my finest warriors."

I met his gaze and grinned back. "Doesn't mean I won't try."

His laughter boomed through the chamber. "I like this one," he said to no one in particular. "Got a death wish, but I like him." He leaned back, fingers drumming idly against the armrest of his throne. "But you won't be taking the amulet. Not today, not ever."

I didn't react. "And why is that?"

Durnharg's expression darkened. "Because it's not mine to give."

The words were slow, deliberate, laced with something unspoken. A warning.

I said nothing, waiting.

The king gestured, and one of the guards stepped forward, placing something in his outstretched palm. A key. Old, iron, etched with sigils older than anything carved into these halls.

The amulet," Durnharg said, holding the key between his thick fingers, "was sealed in our ancestral vault the moment it came into our possession. We paid in blood and gold for it, and now it will remain where no man, beast, or god can claim it.

I tilted my head. "You traded for it."

"Aye." His fingers curled around the key. "And I paid in blood and gold to make sure it was never worn again."

"So you're afraid of it."

The room tensed. The guards took half a step forward, waiting for the order.

Durnharg's lip curled. "I'm afraid of nothing, manling. But I know power when I see it." He leaned forward again, voice lowering. "You think you want it. That you'll put it around your neck and suddenly be stronger than the gods themselves. But you don't know what it is. You don't know what it does."

I clenched my fists. The chains rattled.

"Then tell me," I said.

Durnharg was silent for a long moment. Then he sighed, heavy as stone settling into the earth.

"No."

I grinned, slow and sharp. "Then I'll take it anyway."

His expression hardened. "You'll try."

He turned to the guards. "Lock him up. Somewhere deep. Somewhere dark."

I felt the iron fists clamp down on my shoulders as the chains were yanked, pulling me toward the black tunnels beyond the throne room.

They thought this was over.

They were wrong.

They dragged me through the lower tunnels, past thick iron gates and heavy stone doors, deep into the gut of the mountain. The deeper we went, the colder the air became, thick with dust and the scent of damp earth. The cells were carved straight from the rock, narrow chambers with rusted bars, old chains bolted into the walls.

They threw me into one without ceremony. The iron door slammed shut behind me, the lock clicking into place. The guards grunted in satisfaction before stomping back up the tunnel, leaving me alone in the dark.

Fools.

They had taken my sword, but not my hands. Not my mind. I sat there, waiting, listening, letting my body recover from the fight, my wounds stiffening in the cold. I didn't waste my breath calling for the guards. Let them think I had accepted my fate.

When the time came, I would make them regret it.

The moment arrived sooner than expected.

A few hours later, the guards returned, torches in hand, their squat faces twisted with the same arrogance I had seen in every jailer I had ever killed. Two of them entered my cell, one unlocking my chains while the other kept his axe close.

"The king wants words with you," one of them grunted. "Try anything, and you'll be fed to the forges."

I smirked. "You should've left me in the dark."

The moment my arms were free, I moved.

I seized the closest dwarf by the beard and yanked him forward, his head snapping down just as I drove my knee into his gut. The air left his lungs in a wet grunt, his body doubling over. Before he could recover, I brought my elbow down hard on the back of his skull, sending him crashing to the stone floor. Before the second one could react, I twisted, grabbing the first dwarf's dagger from his belt and slammed it into the other's throat.

Blood sprayed across the stone walls.

The one I had kneed tried to rise. I buried the dagger in his back, twisting deep, feeling the life shudder out of him.

I stepped back, panting, wiping the blood from my hands.

The torches still flickered in the tunnel outside. The other guards would be waiting by the king's chamber. Good.

I wasn't sneaking out of here.

I was killing my way out.

Durnharg barely had time to rise from his throne before I entered his chamber, my boots slick with the blood of his guards.

The remaining dwarves rushed forward, axes gleaming. I caught the first one mid-charge, grabbing his wrist and twisting until the bone snapped. His axe clattered to the floor, and I rammed it back into his skull before throwing his twitching corpse into the others.

Durnharg bellowed, reaching for his great hammer.

Too slow.

I leapt onto the throne platform, knocking aside a stone brazier. The king raised his weapon, but I was already there, plunging my stolen dagger into his gut.

The king grunted, eyes wide of disbelief, blood pooling into his thick beard. "Fool..."

"You should've given me the amulet," I growled.

I twisted the blade.

Durnharg's mouth opened, as if to curse me, to spit one last insult—but all that came out was blood. His knees buckled. His weight sagged against my grip, the strength bleeding from his body as his fingers went limp around his hammer.

Then he was dead.

I shoved his body off my blade and grabbed the key from his belt—the key to the vault.

The mines were far from abandoned. Dozens of dwarves toiled away, their hammers ringing against stone, voices gruff with orders and curses as they hauled carts of ore from the tunnels. They were scattered across the mountain, some deep within the lower shafts, others near the forges, their movements disorganized but constant.

I watched from the shadows, weighing my odds. If I was lucky, I could make it to the vault without anyone spotting me, without some fool raising the alarm. But luck was a fickle thing, and a whole garrison of dwarves called this mountain home. If I was caught, they wouldn't waste time throwing me in chains—they'd cut me down where I stood.

I had no choice but to move quietly, to be the shadow between their torchlight, slipping through their halls unseen. The moment one of them saw me, this would turn into a bloodbath. And I wasn't here to fight an army.

The Price of Power

The tunnels twisted endlessly, a labyrinth of stone and shadow. The air was thick with the scent of damp rock and old dust, the weight of the mountain pressing down like a living thing.

I followed the path downward, deeper than any forge, past the mine shafts where dwarves toiled for silver and iron. The deeper I went, the more the air changed. It felt old here. The kind of old that had nothing to do with time and everything to do with power. The walls were smooth, not from picks or chisels, but from something else—something ancient, something deliberate.

The tunnels were cold and endless, the air damp with the scent of stone dust and sweat. Torchlight flickered along the rough-hewn walls, casting long shadows where dwarves toiled, their pickaxes biting into the rock with steady, rhythmic strikes.

I moved in silence, pressing myself into the darkness where the light did not reach. When I passed close to the miners, I held my breath, each step careful, measured. A guard strode past, his axe resting over his shoulder, his boots echoing against the stone. I stayed still, watching as he disappeared into the depths.

The deeper I went, the more the tunnels twisted and split, passages branching off in every direction. I turned left, then right, then left again, following instinct and shadow.

Then I stopped.

I had no idea where I was.

The air was colder here, biting through my cloak, sending a slow drip of unease into my gut. The tunnels stretched before me, identical in every direction, each path winding into more darkness.

For the first time, I hesitated. Had I gone too deep?

I rounded a corner, moving slow, every step placed with care. The last thing I expected was to nearly stumble over a goblin.

The little wretch froze, hunched over a pile of discarded tools, a half-eaten chunk of dried meat clutched in its filthy claws. It was small, even for a goblin, its green skin mottled with grime, its beady yellow eyes going wide with alarm. For a heartbeat, we simply stared at each other, neither moving.

Then it let out a strangled hiss, baring its needle-like teeth, clearly debating whether to flee or fight.

I raised a hand before it could bolt. "I'm not here to gut you, goblin."

It narrowed its eyes, suspicious. “Hooman sneakin’. No guards? No dwarfs?” Its voice was guttural, broken, thick with that ugly goblin dialect, half words, half snarling sounds.

“No dwarves.” I leaned in slightly. “I’m looking for something. The vault. You know where it is?”

At that, the goblin twitched. Its eyes darted left, then right, before it lowered its voice. “Vaaaault...” It rolled the word over its tongue like it tasted of gold. “Big place. Full of stone doors, metal locks, bad magic.”

I grinned. “Then you know the way.”

It hesitated. Goblins were cowards by nature, but they were also greedy little bastards. I leaned closer, speaking slow. “Help me find it, and I’ll let you take whatever you want.”

The goblin’s ears perked up, its jagged grin growing wider. “Aaaany-thing?”

“Anything.” I wasn’t here for gold, after all.

It let out a wheezy cackle, rubbing its clawed hands together. “Good! Good-good! Follow—quiet! Sneaky-like.” It scuttled forward, leading the way, moving with that hunched, twitchy speed only goblins had.

We crept through the tunnels, winding deeper beneath the mountain. At times, the goblin dropped to its hands and knees, crawling through open passages for no damn reason, shaking as if the very air might attack it. This amused me greatly. I watched as it pressed itself flat to the floor at one point, its ears twitching, mumbling nonsense in its gutter language.

“What the hell are you doing?” I whispered.

The goblin snapped its head up, eyes darting. “Not safe. Floor might be cursed. Or hungry.”

I smirked, shaking my head, but let the little creature do as it pleased. If it wanted to grovel and shake its way through the tunnels, it was no concern of mine.

The deeper we went, the older the tunnels became. The rough-mined walls gave way to carved dwarven stonework, thick pillars etched with runes, some still faintly glowing with magic, others cracked and worn by time. The ceilings arched high above, blackened by old torch smoke, while heavy iron-banded doors lined certain halls, their locks rusted but unbroken.

Carvings lined the walls—scenes of dwarves at war, hammering steel, forging weapons that had likely been buried with their long-dead owners. One massive carving depicted a dwarf standing atop a mountain of skulls, a crown of black metal upon his brow, a great hammer raised high.

Durnharg, no doubt.

The goblin skittered ahead, darting between fallen stone blocks and rusted chains embedded in the walls. "Close-close. But careful. Bad things sleep deep."

I rolled my shoulders, my fingers flexing around my sword hilt.

Bad things didn't scare me.

But I loved waking them up.

Then I saw it.

The vault.

It loomed ahead, carved into the very foundation of the mountain, its great doors standing untouched by time. Black stone, impossibly smooth, sealed tight without hinge or handle. Runes covered every inch of it, glowing faintly in the dim torchlight, shifting under my gaze like they were watching.

I stepped closer, feeling the cold pulse of magic radiating from it. This was no mere treasury. No storage for gold or trinkets.

This was a prison.

And inside, locked away, was the amulet.

The key I had stolen from Durnharg sat heavy in my hand, its metal worn smooth from generations of kings carrying it. The same runes carved into the vault doors were etched along its edges.

This was what they had fought to keep hidden.

This was what they had died to protect.

I grinned.

Fools.

I slid the key into the slot at the center of the door.

The runes flared, burning bright as sunlight. The stone shuddered, groaning like a beast awakening from an age-old slumber. Dust cascaded from the ceiling as something clicked deep within the mountain.

The air changed.

Something stirred beyond the door.

I stepped back, hand on my sword, heart pounding against my ribs as the great doors of the vault began to open.

The vault doors groaned open, ancient stone grinding against itself, unleashing a blast of cold air that reeked of dust and something older—something wrong. The flickering torchlight barely penetrated the darkness within, revealing only the faintest glimmer of gold and steel stacked beyond the threshold.

Then the ground trembled.

A deep, guttural rumble echoed from the darkness, like the stirring of something that had not moved in centuries. The torches along the outer chamber flickered, their flames bending inward, drawn toward the vault like breath being sucked from the air.

I stepped back, my hand tightening around my sword.

And then it rose.

From the darkness came the sound of shifting metal, the rattle of bones bound by something unnatural. A figure emerged from the gloom, its massive form draped in rusted plate, its skull still crowned with a helm forged from blackened iron. Its beard, long and matted, was no longer hair but strands of dried sinew clinging to bone. Glowing runes burned in the empty sockets where its eyes had once been. The goblin fled as fast as he could.

A warlord of old. Durnharg's ancestor, perhaps. A king who had ruled in an age before men had ever set foot in these mountains. Bound in death, cursed to stand watch over the thing I had come to claim.

It lifted its weapon—a massive war-axe, its blade carved with sigils that pulsed with dark magic. The grip was wrapped in ancient, flaking leather, and the edges of the steel had not dulled with time. This thing had been forged for battle, made to kill, and death had not robbed it of its purpose.

It stepped forward, its movements slow but deliberate, the ground shaking beneath its weight.

The runes along the vault door flared to life again, burning with new intensity, as if recognizing the moment for what it was. A challenge. A warning.

I met the warlord's gaze, the cold light in its empty sockets boring into mine.

Then it raised its axe.

And charged.

The undead warlord surged forward, its axe carving the air in a sweeping arc meant to split me in half. I barely twisted in time, the edge of the blade missing my ribs by an inch. The wind of the strike was enough to stir the dust at my feet, a reminder that if I miscalculated once, I'd be in pieces on the floor.

I countered, stepping inside its reach and driving my sword toward its chest. The steel met rusted plate, and the impact sent a jarring shock up my arm, but it barely staggered the creature. The warlord did not feel pain. It did not bleed. It did not flinch.

It slammed into me with the full weight of its ancient armor, sending me sprawling onto the stone. The air left my lungs in a sharp grunt, but I rolled before the axe could come crashing down. The blade smashed into the floor, splitting the stone where my head had been.

I scrambled to my feet just in time to see the warlord rip its axe free from the ruined ground, dust and shattered rock crumbling from the impact site.

I circled, my breath heavy, my muscles burning. It moved slow, methodical, like a relentless tide pushing forward, step by step. It had all the patience in the world. I did not.

I lunged again, slashing toward its exposed side. My blade bit into aged chainmail, snapping a few links, cutting into the dried sinew beneath. The warlord reacted this time—not with pain, but with force.

It pivoted, its axe coming at me like a battering ram. I dodged, barely, but not fast enough. The handle caught my forearm as I twisted away, sending a flare of white-hot pain through my bones. My fingers spasmed, my sword slipping from my grip.

I snarled, forcing my body to move despite the shock. I ducked low, dodging another cleaving strike, and lunged at its legs. I tackled it, driving my full weight into the back of its knee. The warlord buckled, staggering.

For the first time, it fell.

I pounced, ripping my dagger free, and drove it into the exposed gap between its breastplate and its rotting spine. The blade punched through dried flesh and brittle bone, the force of it rattling through my arm.

The warlord let out a deep, hollow roar, a sound that sent dust cascading from the ceiling, the torches flickering wildly against the force of its rage.

I twisted the blade, trying to sever whatever dark magic kept it upright. It didn't work.

The warlord's gauntleted fist lashed out, catching me across the jaw.

Pain erupted through my skull. The force of the blow sent me flying, my back slamming into the vault doors. The world blurred for half a second, ringing in my ears.

I barely had time to move before the axe came down. I rolled aside, the warlord's blade shattering the stone where I had landed. Pieces of rock cut into my skin, my arms stinging, but I ignored it.

I scrambled for my sword, fingers wrapping around the hilt as I rose. The warlord turned, the fire in its eye sockets flaring brighter.

I panted, sweat running down my back, muscles screaming in protest. This thing did not tire. It did not bleed. And I was running out of time.

My grip tightened around my sword.

I had to finish this now.

The warlord came at me again, relentless, its axe carving through the dust-choked air. The blade barely missed my head as I ducked, feeling the wind of its swing scrape past my scalp. It followed through with monstrous strength, bringing the weapon back around in a savage horizontal arc, forcing me to dive aside before the blade could take me in half.

I hit the ground hard, rolling through the dust and shattered rock. My lungs burned. My arms ached. My body screamed for rest. But rest was death.

The warlord turned, its glowing eyes locking onto me once more. It stepped forward, slow and inevitable, dragging the great axe behind it, the edge sparking against the stone.

This thing would never stop.

I had to break it.

I lunged, feinting left, then pivoted at the last second, bringing my sword down onto its knee. My blade bit deep, carving through rusted chain and dried sinew. The warlord staggered, its leg snapping at the joint with a sickening crack.

It dropped to one knee, off balance. That was my opening.

I roared, gripping my sword in both hands, and swung with all my strength.

The blade slammed into the side of its skull, the impact ringing through my bones like a hammer on an anvil. Cracks splintered across its blackened helm, bone splitting beneath the force.

The warlord lurched, its movements slower now, the magic holding it together flickering. Its glowing eyes dimmed for a fraction of a second.

Not enough.

I ripped my blade free and swung again. This time, the entire left side of its skull caved inward, bone and rusted metal collapsing under the impact.

The flames in its eyes flickered violently, sputtering.

One last time.

I raised my sword high, gripping the hilt tight, and drove it straight down, burying the blade through the crown of its skull.

The warlord froze.

The runes on its armor dimmed, their power flickering like a dying fire. Its axe slipped from its grasp, clattering against the stone. The magic that had bound it for centuries unraveled, like thread snapping one by one.

And then, with a final, hollow groan, it collapsed.

The massive body crashed onto the ground, its bones turning to brittle fragments, its armor rusting away in seconds, as if time had finally caught up with it. The flames in its ruined skull vanished, leaving behind nothing but cold, dead silence.

I stood over the remains, breathing hard, my fingers shaking from the exhaustion, my arms trembling with the effort of holding my sword.

And then I saw it.

Beneath the shattered ribcage, nestled among the dust and broken armor, something gleamed.

The amulet.

I crouched, reaching into the remains, my fingers closing around the ancient metal. It was cold—far too cold, even in the frigid depths of this vault. As I pulled it free, I felt something shift in the air, as if the very mountain had exhaled.

The amulet was black, its surface polished to an unnatural sheen, carved with symbols older than any language spoken today. A dull red glow pulsed from its core, like an ember buried deep in the dark.

It was power.

I grinned, breath still ragged, blood still fresh on my hands.

This was what I had come for.

This was mine.

The amulet pulsed in my palm, the dull red glow flickering like a dying ember. The longer I stared at it, the heavier it felt—not like metal, not like stone, but something else, something alive.

I turned it over, my fingers tracing the ancient runes carved into its surface. The symbols burned cold against my skin, colder than they had any right to be. It wasn't just an artifact. It wasn't just magic.

It was something more.

I should have hesitated. Should have questioned what lay within.

I didn't.

I slipped the chain over my neck, letting the amulet settle against my chest.

The moment it touched my skin, the world lurched.

A violent pulse of power shot through my veins, setting every nerve in my body alight. My vision blurred, the torchlight stretching into endless streaks of red and black. My heart slammed against my ribs, pounding like war drums, too fast, too strong, as if trying to break free from my chest.

Then came the whispers.

Not voices. Shadows, curling through my skull like smoke, filling the cracks of my mind, twisting around my thoughts. They spoke in a language I did not know but somehow understood.

Power. Hunger. Dominion.

I gritted my teeth, clutching at my skull as the whispers grew louder, layering over each other, a storm of voices screaming beneath my skin.

I saw things.

Visions—cities burning, men bowing, the earth breaking apart beneath my feet as I stood above it all, stronger than kings, stronger than gods.

And then, the cost.

The shadows clawed at me, curling through my muscles, wrapping around my bones. My flesh felt stretched, my blood tainted, something slithering beneath my skin that had not been there before.

It was power. Pure. Limitless.

But it was not mine alone.

I gasped, forcing air into my lungs, steadying my stance. The vault was still. The warlord's corpse lay shattered before me. The whispers did not stop, but they lessened, fading to a murmur at the edge of my thoughts.

I looked down at the amulet resting against my chest. Its glow pulsed in time with my heartbeat.

I felt stronger.

Faster.

More alive than I had ever been.

But something watched me now.

Something had been waiting.

I touched the amulet one last time, then turned toward the tunnel.

I had power.

I had what I came for.

Now I just had to live long enough to use it.

Chaos Unleashed

I emerged from the tunnels beneath the mountain, stepping out into the biting cold of the northern peaks. The wind howled, bitter and sharp, cutting through the torn edges of my cloak. Snow had begun to fall, thick and heavy, blanketing the jagged stones beneath my boots.

But something was wrong.

The world felt different.

The air was heavier, thick with something unseen, something waiting. The sky above was not the dull gray of an overcast morning but darker, tinged with streaks of deep crimson bleeding through the clouds. The snow no longer fell in gentle drifts—it moved in twisting patterns, shifting unnaturally, as if stirred by unseen hands.

I tightened my grip on my sword and took a slow step forward.

Then I felt it.

A presence.

Not men. Not beasts. Something else.

The amulet against my chest pulsed, the cold metal searing into my skin. The whispers in my skull stirred, laughing, murmuring, speaking in tongues I did not want to understand.

I turned—and saw them.

Shadows twisted at the edges of the pass, things that had no true form, flickering between flesh and mist. Eyes—too many, too deep—glowed faintly in the gloom, peering from the crags, watching. Waiting.

One stepped forward.

It was almost a man. Tall, gaunt, its skin stretched too tight over its bones. Its hands were wrong, the fingers too long, twitching, curling. Its mouth was stitched shut, but I could hear it breathing, hear the rattling gasp as if something inside it was trying to escape.

It was not alone.

More slithered into view, half-formed horrors, shifting between states, flickering in and out of the wind like smoke given purpose.

They knew me.

The amulet pulsed again, and the whispers in my head howled in delight.

I clenched my jaw. I had done this.

The power I had taken, the thing I had woken, it had changed me. The world felt it, and now these things—these horrors—had come for me.

I unsheathed my sword, rolling my shoulders, the fresh wounds from the dwarves still stiff beneath my armor.

The wind howled louder.

The things watched, shifting, circling, drawn by something I could not yet see.

I smirked.

Good.

I was tired of killing things that could scream.

Let's see how well they bled.

The wraiths moved as one, flowing toward me like ink spilled across the snow, their forms flickering between substance and shadow. The wind carried their whispers—low, hollow voices that slithered into my skull, curling around my thoughts like parasites burrowing into flesh.

I tightened my grip on my sword. The blade felt heavier than before. Not from exhaustion, but from something else. As if the metal itself knew that steel alone would not be enough.

The first wraith struck.

It lunged without a sound, its body stretching unnaturally, its fingers elongated into curved claws of pure blackness. I dodged, twisting away just as those talons raked through the space where I had stood. The air itself screamed, the cold burning like frostbite against my skin.

I countered. My sword whipped through the wraith's torso, and for a moment, the blade met resistance—something like flesh, something that still clung to form. Then the steel passed through, the wound closing behind it like smoke reforming after a breath of wind.

The wraith let out a choked, hollow laugh.

I snarled, stepping back, adjusting my stance. This was different. I had fought men, beasts, monsters—but these things weren't alive. They weren't bound by muscle and bone.

And yet, they had come for me.

The amulet against my chest pulsed. The whispers in my skull laughed, deep and resonant, amused by my struggle.

Another wraith lashed forward, faster this time, its claws tearing across my arm. The pain was not sharp—it was cold, an aching, hollow thing that burrowed deep, making my flesh feel numb and rotted where it touched.

I growled through the pain and lunged, this time aiming not for the body, but for the head. My sword carved through the wraith's face, and this time, it screamed.

The form shuddered, its twisted shape flickering, unraveling at the edges. It had felt that.

I grinned. There was a way to kill them.

Another came, its clawed fingers reaching for my throat. I didn't dodge.

I grabbed its wrist instead.

My hand burned instantly, the cold sinking into my bones, but I didn't let go. I pulled. Hard.

The wraith stumbled, its form shivering, flickering like a dying flame. My sword came up, and I drove the steel straight into the hollow space where its heart should have been.

A shriek tore through the valley, loud enough to rattle my skull. The wraith convulsed, its limbs snapping and twisting, its form collapsing in on itself like a starved corpse shriveling to dust.

It vanished.

The others hesitated.

I bared my teeth, ignoring the burning cold still eating at my flesh. "Come on then," I spat. "Let's see how many of you I can send screaming back into the dark."

They answered.

They rushed me, their forms blurring, their claws hungry for my soul.

I met them with steel and fury.

The wraiths fell one by one, their shrieks lost to the howling wind. My sword, once useless against their ghostly forms, now cut deep, tearing through shadow and smoke as if striking flesh. I felt it—the power inside me changing, twisting, reshaping itself into something darker, something that did not belong in the hands of mortals.

I moved faster, struck harder, felt stronger than ever before. My body should have been exhausted, my wounds should have slowed me, but they didn't. The pain was distant, swallowed by the surge of power coursing through my veins.

The last wraith let out a guttural shriek as I drove my sword into its chest. It writhed, its form unraveling, limbs jerking violently before it dissolved into nothingness, leaving behind only the hollow echo of its final scream.

Then, silence.

I stood amidst the snow and blackened shadows, breathing hard. My hands trembled, but not from exhaustion. My body hummed with energy, my pulse hammering in my ears like war drums.

The amulet against my chest pulsed, its glow deepening to a rich, hungry red.

And then the visions came.

Fire.

I staggered, my sword slipping from my grasp as my mind lurched, dragged into something beyond the present.

I saw cities burning, their towers crumbling under a sky choked with black smoke. Men screamed, their flesh peeling away as unseen forces tore them apart. The ground split beneath my feet, fire erupting from the earth, swallowing villages whole.

And I was there.

Standing amidst the ruin, my hands slick with blood, the amulet glowing like a second sun against my chest.

I saw bodies at my feet—kings, warriors, men who had once called themselves strong. Their skulls were piled high, their crowns melted into slag, their corpses nothing more than hollow husks drained of life.

And the laughter.

Not from the dying. From within me.

I gasped, clutching my head, my breath coming in ragged gulps. The world around me flickered, shifting between reality and something far, far worse.

The whispers in my mind had grown louder.

They no longer whispered.

They sang.

I stumbled forward, barely keeping myself upright. The snow crunched beneath my boots, but it felt unreal, as if I were walking in two worlds at once—this one, and another, one of endless fire and death.

The amulet pulsed again, and the visions deepened.

I saw myself ascending, standing atop a throne made of bone, the world itself bowing at my feet. The sky wept blood, the rivers ran black, and those who remained were twisted, broken things, worshiping me not out of loyalty but out of sheer, unrelenting terror.

My breath hitched.

I clenched my fists, my nails biting into my palms, forcing the visions back.

This was the price.

This was the cost of power.

And I had already begun to pay it.

The town was small, nameless, just another miserable cluster of hovels nestled against the valley's edge. A place where farmers scraped by, where traders passed through without a second glance. No walls, no guards beyond a few aging militiamen, their rusted swords more for show than war.

They never saw me coming.

I walked through the village's dirt road, the amulet cold against my chest, its pulse beating in time with my own. The whispers in my skull had grown familiar, no longer just voices, but something deeper—a hunger, an insatiable need to break, to burn, to kill.

I obliged.

The first man died before he even realized what was happening. A farmer, still clutching a bundle of wood, his beard thick with frost. He turned, blinking up at me, confusion flickering across his face. I drew my sword and carved through his neck in one clean stroke. His head hit the ground before his body, steam rising from the severed flesh in the cold air.

A woman screamed.

Good.

I turned, stepping toward her, watching as her eyes darted between me and the spurting corpse at my feet. She dropped the bucket she had been carrying, turned to run.

I let her.

For a few steps.

Then I raised my hand—just a simple gesture, fingers curling. The amulet pulsed, and her body seized mid-stride. Her legs twisted beneath her, bones snapping like dry twigs, her mouth locked in a silent, breathless scream. I could feel it—her life draining, her body withering, skin tightening against her skull.

She collapsed, a dried-out husk, nothing left but brittle bones wrapped in papery flesh.

Power.

It thrummed through me, stronger than anything I had ever known. My blood boiled with it, my vision sharpened, my limbs felt unbreakable.

A militia fool charged at me, rusted sword shaking in his grip. I let him swing.

The blade hit my shoulder, but I barely felt it. His eyes widened in horror as I grinned, grabbing his wrist with one hand and snapping his arm backward at the elbow. The scream was raw, wet, desperate.

I drove my sword through his gut, twisting, feeling the blade catch on his spine before tearing free. He fell, his entrails spilling across the mud, his face frozen in agony.

The town erupted in chaos.

People ran, fled toward the woods, toward their hovels, toward anywhere but here. It wouldn't save them.

I was faster now.

I cut a fleeing man down at the knees, leaving him crawling in the dirt, sobbing, begging. I stomped on his skull, feeling it give, then burst, blood and bone spraying the frost-covered ground.

A mother clutched a child to her chest, backing away, her breath ragged with terror. I saw her lips move—praying, begging, pleading.

I stepped forward.

The amulet burned against my chest, and I raised my hand.

She collapsed in a heap, her skin splitting open from the inside, blood gushing from every orifice, her body shaking, writhing until the life simply drained away. The child screamed.

I almost laughed.

The last of them tried to flee toward the chapel at the far end of the village, as if their gods would save them now. I followed, my boots slick with blood, my body thrumming with power, my heart pounding with the thrill of slaughter.

This was right.

This was what I was meant to be.

And by the time the sun set over the valley, the town was nothing but ruins, corpses, and silence.

The village lay in ruins, bathed in blood and fire. The bodies were strewn like broken dolls—some still clutching weapons, others curled where they had fallen, useless prayers frozen on

their lips. The houses burned, the flames casting jagged shadows across the corpses, making them seem as though they still moved, still twitched, refusing to accept that their miserable lives had ended.

I stood in the center of it all, my breath steady, my heart hammering against my ribs—not with exertion, but with something deeper. Something old, something primal.

Power.

It coursed through me, thick as molten iron, every muscle alive, every nerve sharpened beyond mortal limits. The amulet's glow pulsed with my breath, its heat burning into my chest, a brand that could not be removed.

The whispers in my head were no longer whispers.

They were roars.

They did not command.

They did not beg.

They praised.

I raised my hands, staring at them. My fingers trembled—not from weakness, but from the sheer force of the thing inside me. My skin was still mine, my body still whole, but I felt different.

No—I was different.

The man I had been was dead, buried beneath the bodies of those who had fallen before me.

I was something worse now.

Something the world had never seen before.

Something it would learn to fear.

I let my hands drop, my gaze sweeping over the destruction, the carnage, the proof of what I had become. The gods had forsaken this place. They had not stopped me.

They wouldn't.

The change came like a sickness—sudden, irreversible, consuming me from the inside out.

I staggered, pressing a hand to a wall, my fingers trembling. But they were no longer my fingers. The flesh blackened, cracks splitting open along my skin like old leather left to dry in the sun. I could see the bone beneath, not white, not living, but ashen and veined with something darker, something writhing beneath the surface.

I tried to breathe, but nothing came. My chest did not rise, my lungs did not take in air. There was no heartbeat, no warmth, no pulse—only the cold, sinking into the very core of me, spreading like frost over dead earth.

My vision pulsed, shadows curling at the edges, swallowing the light like a great, empty maw. The world itself seemed to blur, shapes bending, outlines stretching, as if I was no longer fully bound to the flesh I once wore. My limbs thinned, the muscle withering away, leaving only skin pulled tight over jagged bones, as if my body had rotted in mere seconds.

I raised my hands, watching the fingers lengthen, the nails darken to clawed tips, the last remnants of mortal flesh peeling away like old parchment. I should have felt pain. But there was only stillness.

I was becoming something else.

Something worse.

The whispers in my skull, once distant, howled in delight. The amulet at my chest burned, but not like fire—it was a hunger, pulling, drawing me into something vast, something endless.

And for the first time, I understood.

I was not dying.

I was unmaking.

And when I was whole again, the world would kneel or burn.